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ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER AT THE NEW YORK, N. Y., POST OFFICE.

August 8, 1894.

No. 824.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
93 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. LXIV.



HE CREPT ALONG THE WALL FOR A FEW PAGES, THEN STOPPED SHORT
AS HIS HAND STRUCK A ROPE.

OR,
Dan Dunn's Right Hand Man.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, Jr.

CHAPTER I.

A SHOT AT A SHADOW.

THE convict crouched close to the dingy brick wall, covering his face with his arms as a blinding glare rent the hurrying storm-clouds above. With the swift return of darkness, he lifted his head, sweeping his sunken eyes along the high wall surrounding the prison buildings.

At an angle of the massive wall, he could detect the phantom-like figure of the guard, with rifle in hand, facing in that direction.

Had that broad glare of light betrayed him? Were those keen eyes only waiting to surely distinguish his cowering form before leveling the

repeating-rifle to send a ball through heart or brain?

Lower still the convict crouched, stretching his muscular figure along the base of the wall, hiding face and hands lest they betray him by their lighter shade. He even held his breath as he heard, with ears sharpened ten-fold by savage fear, the slow, measured tread of the sentry marching along the wall toward him. Was it simply in the performance of his duty? Or was he coming to make sure that crawling shadow possessed substance as well as form?

Pace by pace, slowly, as though intentionally prolonging the torture of suspense, the guard paced his beat, pausing—

"If he finds it! If he gives the alarm!"

The words seemed burned in letters of fire on the brain of the shivering convict. His heart seemed to stop beating. In those few moments he suffered all the agony of a pain-racked death!

Were all his hopes to be so cruelly shattered? Was it all a mockery? Had he been duped into believing that escape from that living death was possible, only to be dragged back to suffer still worse?

His shivering ceased with that awful fear. He silently drew up his feet, his hands clinching, his teeth closing until it seemed as though the enamel must splinter.

"Never alive! Never back there! Kill me—or I'll kill you!"

Another half-minute of this agony of suspense, and the desperate man would have leaped to his feet and risked all on one mad effort to escape; or, if escape was impossible, to kill even as he was slain.

But he fell to shivering again as he heard the guard slowly tramping back, along the wall, stopping just short of discovery. Another half dozen short paces—then a fleeting flash of lightning!

"Did he see it? Is he playing cat to my mouse? Does he want an excuse for shooting me? Or—is he the man?"

The felon mentally asked these questions as he ventured to lift his head sufficiently to watch the guard as he paced back toward his little box, at the angle in the wall. And as he did so, there came a swift gust of wind, followed closely by a pattering shower of cool rain-drops.

In his renewed hope, the escaping prisoner raised erect, straining his eyes to follow the guard, hoping and praying that this welcome shower might drive him into his shelter.

"If only for five minutes!" he panted. "Only one minute! A year of my life for a single minute!"

He saw the sentinel near the sentry-box, and, as the phantom-like figure blended with the structure, he started into motion. He dared not wait longer. He must run the risk. And, after all, was the risk so very great?

He crept along the base of the wall for a few paces, then he stopped short as his hand struck against a cold, damp, snake-like substance—a rope—lying close against the dingy bricks! His breath came with a sharp gasp as his eyes turned upward; not in prayer, but with an instinctive effort to divine the chances for or against another lightning-shaft that now might reveal all!

No flash came, and with fierce resolve the desperate man grasped the rope with both hands, and rapidly hauled himself up the smooth face of the wall.

His strong hands closed on the hard coping, and hanging thus for a brief space, he tried to penetrate the gloom with his vision.

The rain was beating sharply into his face now, but he could dimly distinguish the sentry-boxes as they stood out against the stormy skyline. He strained his sight to discover whether or no the sharp-driving shower had sent the guard into his covert, but that was beyond his power.

Then he turned his gaze in the opposite direction, but there the sky was still more densely clouded, and he could see naught after the first few yards of bare wall.

For all he knew, the guard might even then be approaching, near enough for his trained eyes to instantly detect a human figure should it venture above the coping, even in that gloom; but he dared linger no longer. At any moment another broad glare of lightning might come to surely betray his desperate attempt at escape.

With a silent swiftness that spoke of powerful and trained muscles, the fellow swung himself upon the wall, flattening out and lying close, while he hurriedly drew up the rope to drop it on the outer side, shifting the strong iron hook as he did so, making its hold on the inner edge secure.

But—even as the knotted length slipped through his fingers to the black depth below, the haunting dread at his heart was realized. The storm-clouds were rent in twain and the brilliant flash seemed to concentrate its rays directly upon himself!

Only an instant, but that was a lifetime to the poor wretch.

He dared not wait to see if he had been discovered. He hardly waited to make sure the grapnel was secure under the inner edge of the cemented coping, then clutched the rope and slid rapidly down it into the gloom below.

With that dazzling flash the rain slackened, and, shortly after, ceased to fall altogether, though the clouds still went skurrying across the face of the moon, still threatening to deluge the face of the earth.

The sentry stood gaping in the narrow door of his little box. Something in the air seemed to make him unusually sleepy, for he had long ago learned to transpose night into day, and only to think of repose when his outside fellows were stretching in bed before rising to resume their daily occupations. For years he had slowly paced to and fro along this lonely beat, his monotonous vigil broken but seldom by any effort on the part of the convicts whom he helped guard, looking toward escape.

"That would keep a fellow's blood stirring, anyway!" he muttered, with a short, hard laugh, as he moved away from the "birds' nest" at the angle of the great wall. "Let's see: how long has it been since the zebras made a—What's that?"

The moon showed its round face through a rent in the clouds, and the guard mechanically shifted his rifle from the hollow of his left arm and bringing its muzzle to the front, pointing downward. Was that only a shadow cast by the moon-split clouds?

The moon was swiftly blotted from sight, and darkness reigned over the wild, rugged, vacant space outside those forbidding walls. But the sentinel never stirred, never moved his eyes from the point where he had sighted something marvelously like the crouching, skulking shape of a human being. He sent out a low, yet penetrating whistle, and seemed to grip his rifle tighter as an answer came along the wall from his neighboring sentry.

As by instinct he seemed to know that the second and larger break in the storm-clouds was sweeping along toward the moon, and with finger on trigger he waited, his face white and hard-set, his eyes all aglow.

Then—the moon shone out once more. Dimly enough to eyes unwonted to the night, but with almost noonday distinctness to those men who had turned night into day.

The spot was vacant where the sentry looked, but he expected that, in case his suspicions were well-founded, and his eyes flashed swiftly around in a semicircle until—

"Halt! who goes there?"

His voice rung out sharply. His weapon leaped to his shoulder, and, mingling with the last words, came a loud explosion.

Was that a human scream of agony?

It seemed the work of a magician's wand!

One instant that gloomy, repulsive pile was silent as death. The next all was stir and clamor.

The guards shouted aloud their numbers, and each one fired a shot into the air. A massive bell began striking rapidly, filling the great penitentiary with humming echoes. Lights flashed out brightly, and men in dozens and scores seemed to rise from the very shadows, ready dressed and armed to quell the insurrection, should such prove to be the birth of that midnight alarm.

"An escape!" shouted one of the guards on duty, slinging his rifle across his back as he grasped the knotted rope and swiftly slid down to the ground in the tracks of the fugitive.

"An escape!" was repeated throughout the mass of buildings.

No more sleep that night for honest man or guilty, for convict or official. "Who is it?" asked the men in stripes as they lay awake, and listening with breathless interest. And the men in authority asked the same question as they hurried from their snug quarters.

The brazen notes of the alarm-bell were still making the damp air quiver, spreading the tidings far and wide, through the rugged hills, down to the yellow river, where the bright glare of the patrol-boats burning blue lights told that even that avenue of escape was cut off.

Then a loud cry drew all without the walls to a certain point where one of the armed guards was bending over an ugly sight.

"I knew I could not be mistaken, sir," he uttered, with forced composure as the warden came rushing up. "I knew I was firing at a man!"

And he pointed at the ghastly proof lying before them.

CHAPTER II.

AN ENIGMA IN SILK.

"MAY I—is this seat reserved, sir?"

The train had just left the station at Hermann, that bit of "Fatherland," plucked from the picturesque hills of the Rhine and dropped among the bluffs of the Missouri.

Travel was not extensive to or from that sleepy town, and only one passenger obeyed the regulation call of "All aboard!"

This was a lady, richly dressed, with a heavy veil shadowing her face. She paused at the door of the chair car, glancing swiftly along its length, as though to make sure of a seat, then softly closed the door behind her, moving up the narrow aisle with an easy grace and perfect balance which, more than anything else, betrays the experienced traveler.

She paused by a chair which was occupied

only by a small sachel, evidently belonging to the man whose attention seemed wholly absorbed by his newspaper, and who filled the companion seat.

To him her words were addressed, pointed by a light touch on his nearest shoulder by a daintily-gloved hand.

"I beg your pardon!" as the paper dropped to his lap, his steel-blue eyes lifting and a pleasant smile coming to his lips; to freeze there, as it were, the next moment. "Har—Mrs. Haylock!"

His surprise—to give it no harsher name—seemed fully shared by the woman, whose gloved hand was just lifting the veil from her face as the man turned toward her. She shrunk visibly, and seemed about to retreat in confusion, when the gentleman quickly arose and made a passage for her, saying:

"This is an unexpected surprise, madam, but none the less delightful, I assure you! Will you oblige me?"

There was no refusal. His fingers had closed upon her arm, as though to steady her in passing by the outer chair. To draw back now would only create a scene, and—did she wish to draw back?

"It was a lucky chance that led you to this seat, Mrs. Haylock," blandly smiled the man, a half-quizzical light in his eyes as he cast a fleeting glance over the several vacant chairs which the lady had passed by before gaining his side. "If you had taken any one of those, I fear my newspaper would have lost me a rare treat indeed!"

"You are too kind, Mr. Dunn," murmured the lady, sinking into the vacated chair. "Pray do not let me drive you away!"

"Could I be so unkind to—myself?" smiled Dan Dunn, taking the place of his sachel. "You got on at Hermann?"

The lady bowed assent, the motion causing her veil to drop over her fair face, shadowing but not hiding her beauty.

"I thought so," with a confidential nod. "I knew you were not on the train when it pulled out of St. Louis, for I made a tour of the coaches to see if, by chance, I might discover a congenial companion for the trip. You are going to Jefferson City?"

The fair cheek flushed, and a touch of fire leaped into the great blue eyes as they turned to meet his half-mocking gaze. Her tones were audible to his ears alone, but guarded though they were, there was both anger and reproach in them when she spoke:

"You are thinking of the last time we traveled this road in company, Dan Dunn! It is not your fault I am not still a resident of the—the capital!"

"I could never have escorted you to the—the capital, Hattie," imitating her peculiar break to perfection, "without your having first paved the way, remember," smiled the Soft-Hand Detective.

Her glowing eyes turned away, looking out at the rapidly-moving view, one daintily gloved hand nervously fingering her right ear. And Dan Dunn smiled anew as he watched that action.

A very pretty ear, small, tinted, perfect in every respect save one; partly hidden by the jeweled earring as a peculiar birthmark.

This mark was on the ear-lobe. It was as though the lower edge had been pushed up into itself until the lobe was twice as thick as the other, and only half as long. Yet only a close inspection would discover the deformity, if it may be called such.

A little thing, one would say, but by that very birthmark a stupendous fraud had been foiled and its authors brought to justice. Thanks to that very mark, this woman, Harriet Haylock, or "Harlequin Hat," as she was familiarly known to police circles, had been exposed and sent to serve a long term at the State Penitentiary, at Jefferson City, Mo.

No stranger would ever have suspected this. Mrs. Haylock was a more than ordinarily beautiful woman, still young in years, and seeming still more youthful, thanks to the skill which, in part, she had gained during her brief if eventful career on the burlesque stage.

A perfect blonde in complexion and hair; the latter with a sheen and pure yellow such as no dye can bestow; with large, lustrous, eloquent blue eyes and regular features; with a tall, queenly figure, superbly rounded, well set off by her rich yet tasty costume.

A notable couple they were, for Dan Dunn was fully as handsome for a man as Harlequin Hat was for a woman. Tall, athletic, yet built for activity quite as much as for muscular strength, graceful in all his movements, without even the suspicion of effeminacy. He, too, was a typical blonde, though the natural fairness of his skin was now slightly darkened by free exposure to the tanning light of the spring sun and winds. His eyes were large, of that peculiar hue which in repose seems to reflect the summer skies, but which in action turn a cold, keen, hard, steel gray. His close-cropped hair was yellow as corn silk. His heavy mustaches and pointed imperial were of the same color, vailing without hiding the firmness of his mouth and strength of his chin.

A detective by choice, there was nothing in his garb to denote the professional. It was of plain material and business cut. So far as outward appearances went, Dan Dunn might have been a "drummer" or an inland merchant, returning from a business trip East.

"I know that," abruptly added Mrs. Haylock, turning from the window and smiling faintly into his half-mocking face as their eyes met. "You only performed your sworn duty, of course. I could forgive that; I have forgiven it, I try to think; but I can never forget that—you hounded my husband to his death!"

"Not intentionally, Mrs. Haylock," was the grave response. "I would have given my best finger to have taken him alive. You know that!"

"To take him, as you took me and the others, to rust out his life in that living hell!" bitterly muttered the woman, only retaining her self-control by a desperate effort which betrayed itself in her paling lips and tightly-clinched hands. "But let that pass. Horace is dead. I am free once more, despite all your efforts to foil my friends!"

"You wrong me there, Hattie," was the quiet response. "I simply declined to sign the petition for your pardon, because I knew you had not repented the past, nor half-atoned for your many wrong-doings. I never tried to lay even a straw in the way of your friends. Because—shall I say it?" with the old smile coming back to his fine face as he added: "Because I knew that were you set free to go your own sweet way, it would give me more work to do before the end!"

"You mean to insinuate that I could never reform?"

"Can I dispute a lady?" smiled the Soft-Hand Detective.

Harlequin Hat laughed musically, seeming actually pleased for the moment by this doubtful compliment to her morality. Then she grew grave again, her tones earnest and seemingly sincere:

"Still, you wrong me, Daniel. I have lived perfectly straight ever since receiving my pardon from the pen. I mean to live square all the rest of my life. Even more than that—you know that a move has been made for pardoning Dr. Craig Dairmid out of the pen?"

"I have heard something about it, yes," with a slight bow.

"Well, though it is precious little credit to me, I admit that the doctor was drawn into that scrape mainly through my persuasions. Up to that time he was fairly square with the world and the law."

"You were a long time shaping your scheme against Knox Coventry, then, Hattie," smiled the detective. "But let it go at that. You were about to say?"

"That I feel in duty bound to offer Craig Dairmid a fair chance for taking up life afresh," calmly added the woman, unflinchingly meeting that keen gaze. "I have enough money for that, as well as for taking care of myself. I only heard of this intended pardon by a bare chance, for I have been living very quietly in sleepy old Hermann, of late, and I started at once to be on the spot to welcome the poor fellow as he drops his stripes to come out of that living grave."

"You were in St. Louis this day week, Hattie, remember."

"On a flying trip only. I live at Hermann. I have been there for the last three days, as you can easily discover for yourself if you care to take the trouble. Even an ugly woman who was a stranger could not escape observation there!" with a soft laugh.

"Studying for the stage, Hattie?"

"Trying to forget the past," her head bowing and tears dimming the brightness of her eyes.

Dan Dunn must have owned an unusually hard heart, for, instead of being affected by this touch of sad resignation, he smiled broadly. The woman saw this, for she turned upon him with a fire in her brilliant eyes which swiftly dried up all moisture caused by grief. And there was a touch of spite in her tones as she uttered:

"I heard a bit of news concerning you, while in town, Daniel Dunn. I heard you were going to be married very shortly. Is that true?"

"Do you believe everything you hear, Hattie?"

"I believed this, because I hoped it was true!" with almost vicious emphasis. "And yet—I don't know," her tones softening, something like pity coming into her eloquent eyes as they met his own. "I ought to hate you—I do hate you for causing the death of the only man in all this world whom I ever loved! And yet—have you known this Major Nelson Mayne and his daughter Zelna for any length of time?"

"Long enough to call them both my friends, Mrs. Haylock."

Dan Dunn was grave enough now, his eyes keenly scanning the beautiful countenance before him, as though striving to read what might lie beneath that slightly troubled surface. Mrs. Haylock forced a faint smile, then averted her face and resumed her gaze out the window.

For some minutes there was silence between

them. Dan Dunn knew that she had not said all she meant or intended saying at first, but he would not question her on such a subject. It was too sacred for unnecessary talk with one whose past was sciled by crime upon crime. And yet—he felt a strange curiosity to learn just what had been upon the tip of her tongue when she conquered the impulse.

"You are going to Jefferson on business, of course?" abruptly asked the woman, turning once more so as to face the detective. "May I ask if it is anything connected with Craig Dairmid?"

"You mean, am I carrying him news of his contemplated pardon?" Dan Dunn parried, with a faint smile. "Hardly. It is my business to fill the pen, not empty it, you know, Hattie."

"There is no mistake? The pardon will be issued?" she persisted.

"I think it will. I know of nothing to the contrary. Do you wish to be the first to congratulate the worthy doctor on his emancipation? Shall I tell him you are on the way?"

"If you see him, say that a friend will be waiting in readiness to lend him a helping hand when his freedom is given him," coldly responded Mrs. Haylock, drawing down her veil again as the whistlesounded, announcing their arrival at their present destination.

As the train stopped at the depôt, both alighted, the woman to enter a bus, naming her hotel distinctly, with a pointed nod toward the detective who stood near. He nodded in return, by way of saying her meaning was understood, then turned away to the nearest hack, entering it and speaking in a guarded tone to the obsequious driver:

"To the Penitentiary, as rapidly as possible, my man!"

"All right, boss!" and a moment later the hack rolled swiftly off.

CHAPTER III.

A SURPRISE AND A SHOCK.

THE driver was eager to earn his fare, by no means too frequent in that sleepy old town, whose hours of waking are seldom longer than legislative sessions. His team was a fair one, and the distance to be covered not very great, but, rapidly as he drove, Dan Dunn found time for a great deal of thinking, not all of the most agreeable sort.

How much of the truth had Harlequin Hat spoken of? Was her mission to Jefferson City indeed what she claimed? Or—had she learned aught definite concerning the object which brought him there, and was she thinking to foil him?

"Better not try that on, Hattie!" the Soft-Hand Detective muttered to himself in grim warning. "Your own record is hardly clear enough to risk it."

It did not seem possible that his secret could have leaked out in spite of all the precautions taken, but, somehow, this wholly-unexpected meeting with the ex-actress impressed him with a strange sense of impending evil. It was as though a poisonous serpent had drawn its trail across his path without warning.

The hack rolled briskly up before the main entrance to the dingy, incongruous mass of disjointed buildings which comprise the State Prison, the only trace of uniformity about them being the massive wall by which they were guarded.

Dan Dunn bade the driver wait for him, then passed the armed guard on duty and in a few moments more found himself before the then warden.

He was recognized at once, but there was something lacking in the usual urbanity of the official as greetings were interchanged, and Dan Dunn fancied there was an uneasy, troubled light in those keen eyes.

"I wish to see Number 1,213," the detective added, following the rule which prohibits giving any convict the name which he put aside with his ordinary clothing on donning the stripes.

There was no immediate response. The warden was taken with a troublesome cough, and it was only after a repetition of the request that he responded with:

"Then you haven't heard?"

"What?"

"Dairmid—No. 1,213, you know," again clearing his throat.

"What of him? I ask an interview with the prisoner. Must I show my authority, warden?" coldly uttered the detective.

"No, not that, only—he's gone!"

Dan Dunn gave a start, his face paling and a dangerous light leaping into his eyes, no longer blue and placid.

"Gone—where and how? His pardon does not take effect until day after to-morrow, bear in mind, sir!"

"He thought best not to wait for that, Mr. Dunn," with a short shrug and just the ghost of a smile flitting across his strong face.

"You mean to say that No. 1,213 has made his escape?"

"I mean to say that he made the attempt no later than last night."

"And succeeded?"

"I did not say just that, Mr. Dunn," with a

slight change of tone and manner, now that the ice was fairly broken. "You look as though you wanted to blow me up for this unfortunate mishap, but you'll think better of that when you take time to weigh the situation properly. I need not tell a man of your caliber that duty is all and everything to me, and the salary nothing, for you would give me the laugh, but I do say that I'd rather have forfeited a year's profits than have this awkward affair happen just now—when it is almost certain there will soon be a change of administration!"

Dan Dunn kept his hot impatience fairly well in subjection, but at the first fair opportunity he cut in with:

"You say No. 1,213 attempted to escape last night. He either succeeded or he must have failed. Please let me know in one word which was the case."

"He did, and he didn't, Dunn," with a forced laugh which but poorly covered his real uneasiness. "I think I am safe in saying that No. 1,213 will never read or hear read the governor's pardon."

"He was killed, then?"

"One of the guards shot him, while outside the wall."

Dan Dunn drew a long breath, his stern features relaxing somewhat, though there was nothing of pleasure to be read in his grave countenance.

"It might have been worse than that, but—did he know that a pardon was about to be sent here for him?"

The warden nodded a gloomy assent.

"That's the funniest part of it all, you see!" nervously biting his lip as his little black eyes shot a half-covert glance into the face of the Soft-Hand Sport. "He knew that his pardon only lacked the governor's signature, and I told him myself that that was fully assured. Then—why the Foul Fiend did he make such a break and put me into such an ugly box, I'd like to know?"

"No one can blame you, if he was shot while escaping."

"Then you don't know the rascals who are trying to throw me out of a job, Dunn," with a bitter laugh. "They'll swear it's all a put-up job to cover up my own carelessness!"

"Cured by a single cartridge?"

"Will they grant that it is cured, though?"

"If you can show them the body, why not?"

The eager black eyes sunk, and the warden muttered:

"I can't do that, and that's just what's the matter, Dunn! I can almost take oath Dairmid is dead, but—"

"You said he was shot by the guard while outside the wall?"

"So I did. So he was, unless all signs lie."

"Show me those signs, will you?" asked the detective, the old doubts plainly reviving in his brain. "No. 1,213 was a cunning rascal long before he came here, and he may still be one since you can't put a finger on his corpse. I'll never believe him dead until I can swear to his burial!"

The warden pulled a knob beside his desk, and when his call was answered he bade the "trusty" send him Stevens at once. This was the name of the guard who had fired at the escaping convict the night before, as he explained to the detective.

While waiting for the guard, the warden told Dan Dunn much of what had transpired during those stormy hours, and when they left the Penitentiary, to pass around the great wall to the point where the first "sign" had been discovered, the detective was fairly well acquainted with the escape of his prey.

Stevens, somewhat pale-faced and ill at ease under his assumed stolidity, at once led the way to the spot where his startling cry had gathered the officials the night before. He pointed downward to where a piece of tarpaulin covered the damp ground as he muttered:

"It was right here that I sighted him, your Honor."

Dan Dunn lifted the stiff cloth, to reveal a red blotch which covered two small stones thus protected.

"It was only a shadow, like, but somehow I knowed what made it. It was my duty to shoot, and so I fired. Then—"

The warden made a swift sign which forbade the guard saying more, just then. If seen by Dan Dunn, the gesture was passed by in silence. Like a human hound on the scent he was advancing along a trail which led from the blood-stains toward the river.

Fortunately but little rain had fallen after the smart shower under cover of which Craig Dairmid crossed the great wall, and though in more places than one the trail was obliterated by the feet of those who searched for the convict, Dan Dunn possessed too keen senses to be thrown out by this. As often as a break occurred, his quick eyes recovered the scent a little distance ahead.

"I can show you the end of it, Dunn, if you like," volunteered the warden, but the detective paid him no attention.

He had already lost an hour of valuable time in trying to pin the uneasy officer down to the simple truth, and now he preferred to depend on his own skill as far as possible.

This was not so long. The prison was situated only a short distance from the river, and, thanks to the moisture with which the ground was filled, there were no tedious waits while Dunn picked out the trail of the convict. Here and there were blood-marks on the rocks. Yonder a man had slipped, to roll down a steep bank into a wet gully. Yonder he had escaped another fall, only through an out-flung hand, the palm and fingers of which had left a fair photograph in the mud.

Dan Dunn paused a few moments over this, as though he was trying to recall its counterpart in the flesh; but he made no remark as he pressed forward again.

He reached the river-bank, covering the last few yards with still greater deliberation, for here the signs grew terribly significant.

He saw marks which plainly indicated that the wounded convict had fallen from exhaustion or loss of blood. He saw where he had dragged himself forward, like a crippled snake, digging his fingers deep into the tenacious clay, and here and there still lingered little pools of blood, coagulated, as though the miserable wretch had been forced to lie for a time, fainting, too weak to resume his terrible flight.

"He couldn't have got this far unless as strong as a bull!" grimly commented the warden. "The blood don't show as plain as it did by the lanterns last night, but you can guess how little he must have had left. If his veins had emptied before they did!" with sudden rancor.

He pointed to where the bank sloped abruptly down to the sullen, yellow tide hurrying past. And Dan Dunn frowned anew as he looked.

The crippled convict had dragged himself to the very verge of the slide, and either through accident or bent on finding death rather than suffer recapture, he had rolled down the bank, ending his trail in the river itself!

"He must have done it while we were hunting for him back yonder, and right in the light of the patrol boats, too!" added the warden, in strong disgust, yet with a certain eagerness which did not escape the keen senses of the silent sleuth-hound. "Isn't it plain enough? Isn't it a moral certainty that he is dead? Any one but an idiot or a scoundrel who has a wish to blacken my record would unhesitatingly say yes!"

"The patrol boats saw nothing? They never even heard the splash which such a tumble must have made?"

The warden shook his head reluctantly, like one who wished he could safely give another answer.

"How did he manage about getting outside the pen?"

"That's the ugliest part of it all!" gloomily responded the official, tugging at his grizzled beard. "The point that my enemies will make the most of when an investigation is ordered, as of course one must be. He must have had help from inside the pen."

Like one who felt a certain degree of relief in telling all, now that the worst could no longer be concealed, the warden explained how the escape had undoubtedly been effected. It was simply impossible for the rope to have been adjusted to the wall by outside parties without assistance from those within, and equally clear that No. 1,213 could not have secreted the rope and grapple either in his cell or about his person, until the time arrived for using it in scaling the wall.

While the warden was explaining this, the little party were returning toward the Penitentiary, and Dan Dunn was on the point of asking certain questions which occurred to him, when their attention was arrested by a horseman riding rapidly toward them, waving a bit of paper or an envelope in his right hand.

"For Daniel Dunn!" panted the messenger. "Where'll I find him?"

"I'm your man, sir!" cried the Soft-Hand Detective, springing forward and catching the pale brown envelope, tearing it open after a single hasty glance at the superscription, to read the startling words:

"Return at once. Your father found murdered in his office this morning. Will hold everything as found, until you get here. TURNBULL."

CHAPTER IV.

THE WRITING ON THE WALL.

It was an ugly discovery for any man to make, and though "Humpy" Timberlake was wont to pride himself upon his nerve whenever in a boasting mood, which invariably followed hard upon his third glass of strong waters, he may be pardoned for tripping over his own broom as he turned in headlong flight from that awesome spectacle.

"Murder! murder!"

Almost instantly the huge building, devoted for the most part to offices, was alarmed, and the majority followed after the janitor as he half-plunged, half-rolled down the long flight of steps leading to the outer air, all in a breath demanding where and what and whom.

Not until the strong grip of a policeman closed on the deformed shoulder of the janitor did he cease his wild yelling, or let drop a word which could direct attention to the right quarter.

"Up yonder—in his office—all blood an'—"

"Who and where, you idiot?" sharply interposed the officer, motioning back the eager, pale-faced group with his locust. "Spit it out in a mouthful, or I'll run you in for drunk and disorderly!"

As he spoke the officer jerked the trembling janitor back into the hallway, thus adroitly barring the passage until he saw fit to open it to the crowd. And a brisk tap of his club emphasized his order.

"Up there—Mr. Tostivan—oh, such an awful sight!"

By this time quite a crowd was collected, and looking over their heads the policeman saw another officer hurrying toward the spot. When he came up, the first on the scene left him in charge of the passage, at the same time suggesting that it might be best to send word at once to the captain in charge of that district, then bade the janitor show him to the chambers of Lapier Tostivan.

He had to more than half lift the fear-smitten old man up the long flight, and to restrain him by actual force after he pointed out the room in which he had made his awful discovery.

"Please let me go, boss," whimpered the poor fellow, his teeth chattering with abject fright as he hung back from the still open door. "I'll be ha'nted ferever as it is, an'—oh! the bitter black day!"

Paying no more attention to this moan, the officer glanced keenly into the room, his bronzed face growing a little more stern as he, too, beheld that ghastly spectacle. He gazed long enough to make sure the room was tenanted only by the dead, then closed the door, standing guard before it, watchful and alert, still gripping the poor janitor by an arm.

Thus his superior found him, a few minutes later, as he rapidly mounted the stairs, closely followed by an aldermanic figure, puffing and growing redder in the face with every step, but wearing a dogged expression upon his fat face and in his little eyes.

"I've left everything as it was, Captain Drake," respectfully explained the officer, as he saluted his superior. "I did not even step inside, thinking it best to wait for your arrival."

"Thank you, Mallory," nodded the captain, with a keen glance at the little hunchback. "What has he to do with the case?"

"He found the body, your Honor."

"Hold him, then. I may want to question him after a bit."

"And I'll want him for a witness, too!" spluttered the fat man, as he attempted to push past the officer, to follow the captain into the chamber of death. "What do you mean, fellow?" in hot indignation, as he was repulsed by that powerful arm. "This is my captain!"

"Let him pass, Mallory," ordered the officer, opening the door which he was in the act of closing behind him. "He is the coroner, and—Glad to have your able assistance, Mr. Eppstien."

The fussy coroner caught his scant breath for another outburst, but his words were checked by the strange spectacle before him.

The apartment was a fairly large one, lighted by two windows, looking out upon the busy street. The floor was neatly carpeted, the walls painted with a faint tint of blue. A round table occupied the center of the room. On two sides stood closely-filled bookcases. In a corner stood a burglar-proof safe. Several chairs, with the usual gas fixtures, completed the furniture of the apartment.

Lying a little to one side of the smallest bookcase, which also served as a desk, and between it and the iron safe, was the figure of an old man, the bright light falling across his ghastly countenance, his half-veiled eyes, his long, silvery hair and patriarchal beard—a face which had been sternly handsome in life; a face which was impressively awesome in death.

His left hand and arm were doubled beneath his body, as though it had suddenly yielded while trying to support his sinking frame. His right hand was extended, touching the wash-board below the plastering, down which ran a faint streak of red.

Above this irregular smear, the two men read in letters of blood:

"MURDERED BY ZELNA MA—"

Pale, stern-faced, Captain Drake deciphered these irregular, tremulously shaped letters, which ended in the faint smear already spoken of, as though death had claimed its prey before the damning accusation could be completed. Then he softly stepped forward and bent his head to gaze upon the accusing hand. The forefinger was darkened with blood!

No need to ask from whence came this gruesome ink. A broad stain of crimson marred the snowy shirt-front, and the corpse was lying in a coagulated pool.

Coroner Eppstien had just conquered his nerves sufficiently to offer to test the pulse of the prostrate figure, when stern voices just without the door attracted their attention. With a frown Captain Drake crossed over and opened the door, to be instantly addressed by a wiry built man of middle age.

"What is this about a murder—Merciful heavens!"

The exclamation came as he caught a glimpse of that silent figure lying on the floor, and with a sudden effort the man pushed past the captain and crossed the room, falling on his knees beside the dead man, a hand resting tremulously over the region of its heart.

"Dead—murdered—and he not here!" came hoarsely from his lips, followed by a start of fresh amazement as his burning gaze fell upon the cruelly-stained wall.

"You know the gentleman, then, Turnbull?" asked Drake.

There was no immediate response. The wiry little man slowly rose to his feet, still staring at those damning words on the wall at the head of the murdered man. And it was only when the question was repeated that he turned toward his questioner with a start.

"Yes, I knew him. His name was Lapier Tostivan. He was the father of—of the man whom you know best as Dan Dunn."

"Can you guess what name he started to write on the wall?"

Robert Turnbull boldly faced the officer, his own face very pale, but very resolute, as he deliberately replied:

"I know a lady whose first name matches that on the wall, but she never committed this awful crime. Knowing this—"

"Knowing, or simply believing, Mr. Turnbull?"

"Both believing and knowing, sir," was the emphasized response. "And so knowing, I will not insult her by telling you her last name."

"And rather than supply three little letters, you prefer to insinuate that this poor man died while in the act of recording a lie black enough to sink his soul to the deepest pit of Tophet?" asked the other, his gray eyes glowing curiously as they watched the effect of his words.

"Can you swear that he wrote those words?" bluntly questioned Turnbull in turn, in a sharp, incisive tone.

There was no immediate answer. Captain Drake was attracted by a brief glitter on the floor as he slightly altered his position. The sun was shining through the window, and at a point where a seemingly fresh rent in the carpet showed, it was reflected back from—what?

The question was quickly answered. First gaining the spot, Captain Drake called the attention of both men to his actions, then stooped and picked from under the edge of the torn carpet a slender bit of steel, its point bright, but its upper portion still smeared with dried blood.

"Take note of this, gentlemen, please," gravely uttered the captain, as he held the bit of steel up for inspection. "It is the point of a dagger, blood-stained. The break is fresh, as you can plainly see. Doubtless it will prove to be the weapon by means of which Mr. Tostivan lost his life. Probably the assassin tripped and fell, after dealing the death-blow, breaking his or her weapon against the floor. He or she may never have noticed this fact, in his or her excitement. Or may have been too frightened to stop and hunt for the fragment. Or it may even be that the assassin believed the weapon broke in the body of his or her victim."

Paler than ever, Robert Turnbull gazed at the bit of steel, noting the curious lines lightly engraved upon it even through the film of blood. And, somehow, Captain Drake firmly believed that this was not the first time the man had gazed upon that significant bit of evidence.

But, he said nothing of this suspicion, gently wrapping the blade in a bit of soft paper, slipping it inside an envelope taken from the table, sealing it and then writing his name, with the date, upon the outside. This done, he asked his two companions to do the same. Eppstien signed last, and hastily pocketed the package, saying, doggedly:

"I will be responsible for this gentleman. As coroner—"

"You have my consent, if that is needed," interposed Turnbull, his voice slightly shaken, as he added: "But I beg of you both not to rush matters. I know this poor gentleman. I know his son, who is now absent from town on official business. I can reach him quickly by wire, and will do so at once. He'll come as fast as steam can bring him, and I would like him to see everything just as we have found it. I ask you, gentlemen, as men and brothers, to grant this."

Captain Drake was silent, but the fat coroner frowned darkly, his little eyes looking more and more piggish as he muttered:

"Insist and demand—ever so! Is it you that tells me my business? Is it you that always puts some obstacles in my path when—Gott in himmel!" more plainly revealing his ancestry in his growing excitement. "Somedimes I dinks me I haf to ask for air when I vphants me to some preath taken—yes!"

"Then I'll claim as a right what you deny to my simple request!" flashed the little detective. "I've taken hold of this case. I warn you not to touch an article within these four walls! If you persist, if you do more than simply bring your jury to view the body, I'll swear out a

warrant against you before you're an hour older!"

"On what grounds, may I ask?" demanded Drake.

Turnbull suddenly lost his heat, forcing a smile as he faced the last speaker, an almost wistful light in his dark eyes.

"The grounds of humanity, captain, to you," he answered, his tones barely tremulous as he added: "I love that poor old man, and I would have given my own life to save his. Not altogether for love of him, but because of his son, my master. I can't tell you now how dear that son is to me. I can only say that, next to my Creator, I love him. And I know that he will want to take up this awful trail through his own notes. I know that he will never know rest or peace until he has run the assassin down to the gallows. I know—"

"Even if those red words should prove founded on truth?" asked the officer, his gray eyes shifting toward the wall, then back as if to note the effect of this shot.

"More than ever because of those words!" gravely responded Turnbull, without flinching from that keen gaze. "If Mr. Tostivan wrote them?"

"Have you looked at his right hand, Turnbull?"

Before an answer could be given to this question, a sudden uproar below stairs startled them both, and they instinctively turned toward the door, inclining their heads to catch the excited words.

"I demand admission, sir! These blackguards say—"

"Stop him! Don't let him come in!" hoarsely cried Turnbull, with a glance toward the red letter on the wall. "He's her father!"

CHAPTER V.

FRESH FOOD FOR SUSPICION.

"HER father?" echoed Captain Drake, with a fleeting glance toward that incomplete accusation on the tinted wall. Do you mean—"

"Dan Dunn's promised wife," was the impatient, almost fierce interruption, as Turnbull moved toward the door. "Why do you snatch at every word as though it was a stolen bone? Why do you—"

Captain Drake smiled coldly as he lifted a hand, his eyes glowing vividly as that sonorous voice came floating once more up the stairs:

"On business, sir, and it is none of your business what that business may be, sir! I demand admission, and if you—"

"Choleric old gentleman, the major, don't you think, Turnbull?" softly smiled the officer, without waiting for the end of that speech. "And he is the father of Mr. Dunn's intended? And— isn't it rather a curious coincidence, though? Zelna Ma— Zelna Mayne?"

Robert Turnbull flushed hotly at this pointed suspicion; but, even yet, he would not yield an inch.

"You're 'way off, captain, as I can prove," he returned, doggedly. "All I ask is time, and I'll have it if I have to fight the whole metropolitan force single-handed!"

He dared wait for no more. He could hear the indignant tones of Major Nelson Mayne below stairs, demanding admission to the building, and knew that at any moment something of the awful truth might leak out, to stun or slay the veteran by pure shock.

Realizing as he did how strong was the jealousy which existed between the regularly appointed police force of the city and the detective agency to which Dan Dunn was nominally attached, and how keen the former were to score a possible point against those whom they, right or wrong, deemed interlopers, he was reluctant to abandon the room without first securing a positive pledge from Captain Drake that no open move should be made in this case without a consultation; but he dared not lose time sufficient to attempt to gain even so much.

A less cool-headed man would have been hopelessly bewildered by such a rush of complications, and even Turnbull felt his brain in a confusing whirl as he reached the head of the stairs, to behold Major Nelson Mayne hotly arguing for admission with the stolid officer on guard at the entrance.

"Wait a moment, major!" the little detective cried, hastily descending the flight, not daring to take time to pick or choose his words. "The captain would like to have a word or two with you, and—"

"Turnbull! I want to see—where'll I find Mr. Dunn?" eagerly cut in the red-faced gentleman, pushing past the policeman, who gave way as he heard his superior's title.

Tall, portly, handsome after a military fashion was Major Nelson Mayne, but his usual dignity was forgotten for the present, and his gray-mustached lip perceptibly quivered with poorly concealed emotion as he made this demand. And Turnbull could feel his hand trembling with more than anger as it rested upon his shoulder.

There was no time for deliberate thought. At any moment something of the terrible truth might leak out, and he instinctively wished to defer the inevitable as long as possible.

"Come with me, major," he managed to

utter, turning to climb the stairs again. "You want to see Mr. Dunn? It is very important?"

"Important?" echoed the other, pressing close at his heels. "It's life or death, and may be even more than that, sir! I want him—my little girl's gone—gone, and left no sign to—"

Turnbull caught his breath sharply at this startling tidings, but he quickly turned and clapped a trembling hand over the lips of the veteran, huskily muttering:

"Wait—don't say more until—you don't want every gossip to hear you, man alive!"

He flashed a nervous glance toward the door, beyond which lay the murdered man. But his fears were of and for the living, just then!

Had keen-eared Captain Drake caught any of those words? Was he listening still? And if he had heard, what would be his conclusion?

Robert turned sharply to the left, or in the opposite direction from that which he had taken in order to reach the apartment in which Lapier Tostivan had met such a cruel death. He entered the first open door which offered, never stopping to ask or think to whom the office belonged, only first making sure it was wholly unoccupied just then. And not until he closed and locked the barrier behind them both did he take a full breath.

"This isn't—I want to see Daniel Dunn, sir!" frowned the military man, his first glance failing to recognize these quarters.

"Mr. Dunn is out of town, most unfortunately, sir," ventured the man whom the detective familiarly called his "right hand."

"Out of—how long—when did he go?" faltered Mayne, his naturally florid countenance paling, and something like a frightened light coming into his eyes.

"Last night, on a business trip to Jefferson, sir."

"You saw him off? He was alone? You did not—curse you, sir!" with feeble heat, one hand nervously clutching at his throat as though he felt something strangling him. "Why can't you speak out?"

"I saw him off. He was alone. Neither man nor woman was with him on this trip, major." Turnbull forced himself to utter with deliberate calmness. "Mr. Dunn left me in charge. Tell me what has gone wrong with you since yesterday, and I'll move heaven and earth but what I'll set all to rights again—for his sake!"

In a lower tone came the ending, but there was even greater intensity in those three words than all the rest combined. Man never had a more faithful follower than did Dan Dunn in Robert Turnbull.

Major Mayne made no immediate reply. He turned toward one of the windows, but he never looked out. It was to conquer his own strong emotions rather than to view the prospect.

Turnbull would gladly have welcomed time for reflection, himself, but time was far too precious for willful waste. What was Captain Drake doing? How was Coroner Eppstien busied? Of the twain he was the one to be feared the most, just then, thanks to his piggish obstinacy and his blind, unreasoning jealousy of both the police and the detective force. The bare intimation that either of these, his natural enemies as he considered them, desired delay or secrecy, would be quite enough to make him rush matters after the most public fashion in his power!

"You said— Nothing has happened to Miss Mayne, I trust, major?"

"She's gone—gone without even telling me good-by!" huskily cried the veteran, all effort at self-control vanishing in a moment.

He sunk heavily into a chair by the table, his face dropping into his trembling palms, his massive figure shivering as with an ague.

Robert Turnbull turned even paler than before at this. He tried to not doubt, but despite himself he thought of that awful accusation written in blood on the tinted wall only a few yards from where this man now sat in sorrow too great for words. It was false—it could not be true! Daniel Dunn loved her so ardently! And she—why should she drive a dagger to the heart of his father? Why should she kill father and son by one cruel stroke? For if Zelna Mayne did deal that fatal blow, and the fact ever be brought to light beyond dispute, Turnbull felt that his loved master would never hold up his head again!

"Gone, you say?" he forced himself to ask. "How gone? When, and where? Tell me everything, major, if I am to be of any assistance to you in this trouble."

That cold, dull hardness of which he himself was unconscious, probably did more to restore the father to composure, outwardly at least, than anything else. Mayne uncovered his face, seemingly years older than it had been when the sun rose that morning, and explained:

"I saw her for the last time just after tea, last night. I expected to be out quite late, and as she was suffering from headache, I told her not to think of waiting up for my return. I kissed her—she—"

"The house was quiet when I came home," he resumed, without trying to complete the sentence over which his voice broke so pitifully. "I thought she was asleep, and never knew better until this morning. She was not at table when

I got down. I asked Betsy—the housekeeper—where she was. Not risen, the old woman told me. Even then I never thought of anything wrong, unless it was that she had not yet conquered her headache. And so—I'm too heavy to do any more climbing than I'm absolutely obliged to, you see, Turnbull," with a faint smile that had something pathetic in it. "And so, I asked Betsy to see if I should wait breakfast for my little pet. And then—"

"She was gone, you say?" muttered Robert.

"Gone—and her bed had not been touched that night!" groaned the veteran, dashing a hand swiftly across his eyes. "I saw it my own self, sir! And never a word, nor a scrap, to tell me why and where and what for, sir! Gone—and I blubbering here like an infernal old idiot!" springing to his feet with an outburst of his natural choleric temper.

Turnbull caught his arm.

"I wouldn't think anything wrong too soon, major. I really can't believe that anything has happened to her, or—"

"If there has, do you know whose cursed fingers are at the bottom of it all, sir? Do you know whom I'll call to a bitter account if anything has happened to my little girl? Lapier Tostivan, sir! The hoary-headed old—"

Almost fiercely Turnbull clapped a hand over those anger-quivering lips, for the hot words recalled that ghastly figure in the neighboring office, and the accusing words traced with a dying finger on the wall above his snowy head.

"His father—the father of the man your daughter loves, sir! I can't hear that, even from your lips, major," with a desperate effort conquering his own intense emotions while striving as best he could to calm the veteran and get him safely out of that crime-burdened house.

"You know—or if you don't know, you might as well!" muttered the old soldier, wiping his heated brow and manfully fighting down his fierce doubts and anger. "From the very first Mr. Tostivan has fought bitterly against this match. He has never lost an opportunity to let fall a slur, or an ugly insinuation, against either myself or my poor little girl, whose worst fault is her falling in love with a son of such—of Lapier Tostivan, I will say. And if any evil has befallen my child, I'll hold him responsible for it with the last drop of my blood, sir! I will, so help me—"

"Nothing can have happened to her, I assure you, major," Turnbull soothingly uttered, opening the door and with a quick glance assuring himself that nothing was to be seen of Captain Drake or Coroner Eppstien in the long corridor. "I'll prove this to you, if you'll go to your home quietly. Say nothing to anybody. Don't stop to talk, to ask or answer questions. Go directly home, and wait for me there. Will you promise me this much?"

"You think—"

"Say know, and let it go at that," hurriedly interjected the little detective, hand on the major's arm as he briskly strode along the corridor, not toward the flight of steps up which they had come in company, but toward another leading to the street at the further end of the big building. "Don't talk. Don't act. Just wait until I can come to you. I'll fetch news, be sure!"

He never drew a free breath until he saw the major well down the long flight of steps; then he hastened back to the room they had just left, taking out a fountain-pen with which to write a dispatch which was fated to carry such a terrible shock to the man whom he more than loved.

It was hard to write the words, but he did so without alluding to the terrible accusation left behind by the murdered man. And he was on the point of seeking a messenger to send off the dispatch, when he was startled by an outcry directly beneath his window.

Leaping forward, he beheld Major Mayne caning a young man!

CHAPTER VI.

TOO TERRIBLE FOR BELIEF.

STRONG man though he was, Daniel Dunn staggered back like one drunken as those awful words met his wild gaze.

Found dead! His old father foully murdered!

With a desperate effort he rallied, brushing a hand across his eyes as though the fault lay with them. He could not have read the words aright. There was some frightful mistake. The message must be intended for another.

He read the lines once more and gave a violent start as his eyes paused upon the name appended. Turnbull! His "right hand man." Then—

Even yet it was too terrible to be believed, and he mechanically reversed the torn envelope, staring at his name written thereon.

"No bad news I trust, Dunn?" ventured the warden, curiosity and sympathy mingling in his voice as he noted the awful change which had come into that handsome face.

"My father is dead," hoarsely replied the Soft-Hand Detective, giving his athletic figure a shake as though he could thus lighten the dread burden which had so unexpectedly fallen upon his shoulders.

The warden was not without feeling for others, but despite the sad nature of this news he could not help a feeling of relief. While he knew he had done no actual wrong, he wanted more time for fitting himself for the inevitable investigation.

"Of course you must go back at once?" he ventured, keeping Dan Dunn company as he strode swiftly back toward the Penitentiary.

"Of course," was the curt response, all outward emotion vanishing as by magic. "Spare no pains to recover No. 1,213, dead or alive. If he should be taken alive, hold him fast until I can come or send word to you. That pardon is only one step in the case. I was to arrest him as soon as he was set free, to answer for a hanging crime. Hold him, sir, if recaptured, or your own head shall surely fall!"

So much Dan Dunn forced himself to utter with distinctness, then he sprang forward at full speed, waving his hat to attract the attention of the hack-driver, then shouting:

"Turn around, man, and catch the Down Express for me. If you kill your horses I'll pay for the outfit if you make it in time!"

The fellow was quick-witted, and needed no further hint. He wheeled his hack sharply, but Dan Dunn had a grip on the rail and swung himself up into the seat at his side before the horses had fairly turned toward the depot.

"It's life or death, and I'll pay all damages!" grated the detective, as he caught the whip and laid lash smartly, sending the spirited team forward at a keen run. "Can you make it, think?"

"I kin try, but—"

Even as he spoke there came to their ears the faraway whistle of a locomotive, and the driver left his sentence unfinished. That was answer sufficient, he thought, but not so Dan Dunn.

Again and again he brought the cutting lash into play, though it seemed as if the horses were already running away, the clumsy vehicle jolting and bouncing and swaying from side to side, threatening with each moment to turn over into wreck and ruin.

"I must make it!" cried the Soft-Hand Detective. "How long does she stop?"

"Minnit to five—jest 'cordin'," gasped the driver, with difficulty retaining his seat as they dashed across a little hollow.

"And I can't get a special—curse such a one-horse town!"

That was a ride which the owner of the team will never forget, yet it all seemed worse than useless, for, long before they reached the depot, they could see the rising steam of the iron horse as it started its wheels once more. Then—

Dan Dunn crammed a couple of notes into the pocket of the driver, while his blazing eyes were measuring the distance across the weeds and ruts to the road-bed over which the train must pass. It was a forlorn hope, but the only one remaining, and he took it without hesitation.

With the sure leap of a panther he left the seat and struck the ground, unharmed, though the chances seemed all against him. Quickly recovering from the shock, he ran swiftly across the open waste, swinging his arms and shouting hoarsely in hopes of making the engineer understand sufficient to slacken his steadily increasing pace. But in vain. If seen or heard, he was not needed!

Pale as a ghost, the detective covered the last rods, just as the engine swept up abreast his position, and without a moment's hesitation he caught at the fore-guards of the first car, though he knew that a slip or the failure of his grip must almost surely send him under the wheels to meet a frightful death.

But even in that crisis he remembered that, should he miss this grip, he might possibly stand a chance to catch the next car, and for the sake of that chance he took the terrible risk.

His grip was sure. His fingers closed on the smooth iron rail, but the terrible shock instantly whirled him off his feet, his hand slipping down to the top step, his body swinging out at an angle against the side of the car, one foot actually touching a whirling wheel as it swung past!

A moment thus—then, with an effort of muscle such as not one man out of a thousand could command, the desperate man drew himself up until a knee caught on the lower step!

A nervous hand grasped his collar and aided him in reaching the narrow platform in safety, its owner angrily gasping:

"Are you mad or— Dan Dunn!"

"Had to catch the train, Varley," faintly smiled the detective, as he recognized the conductor, for it was his hand that had helped him up.

"I thought the train had caught you, man!" nervously laughed the other, drawing a long breath. "What in the name of lunacy—"

"Call it that, and let it drop, pardner," cut in Dunn, softening his curtness by a grateful pressure of the hand.

That, and one look into his haggard face, was sufficient for Varley, and he permitted the detective to enter the car without further words.

Dan Dunn passed through to the next car,

where no one was as yet aware of his thrilling experience. Just then he could not bear to be stared at. He wanted to feel alone. To be where he could think without interruption.

Heaven knows he had sufficient food for thought!

His father dead—murdered!

His only relative! The last one in whom his blood flowed! The only one man in all the world whom he loved, as only such a man can love! Murdered—and he calmly racing away from the scene of the dastardly crime at the very minute. He, perhaps, dreaming of love and marriage and perfect happiness for them all—for his snowy-haired father, for his jetty-haired bride, for himself!

Just then that thought gave him the deepest pain.

He sunk low in his seat, drawing his soft hat far over his eyes, knowing that the conductor seeing this would not disturb him, however great his curiosity might be. And then—he started up again with sudden recollection.

Already the swift-flying Express was whistling for the first station south of Jefferson, but he knew the train did not stop at Ewings, and only on rare occasions at the next, or Osage City. It was now too late to prepare a telegram for Ewings, but he must not miss the next. Turnbull would be expecting word, and he must know that the son was hastening to the side of the father as rapidly as steam could carry him.

Writing a few words, Dan Dunn whispered a moment to the conductor, showing him the dispatch which had come to him at the Penitentiary, and the official promised to stop long enough for transmitting the telegram.

This was done, in due course, and knowing that he could do nothing more until reaching St. Louis, the bereaved son once more sought out his secluded seat in one corner of the coach, hiding his face as before, the better to concentrate his painful thoughts.

Murdered! How? By whom? Was there no clew to the perpetrator?

If Turnbull had only been more explicit! If he had offered even the faintest hint on which his busy brain might be working during all those hours of enforced idleness!

"Or if he could only come to meet me by the up-train!"

Might he not do this? Might he not even then be speeding up the line, bearing with him the details which he dared not trust to the wires? Or—would he dare leave his station in charge of the murdered man?

No man knew better than Dan Dunn how sharp was the rivalry between the regular police and the detectives employed by the different agencies in St. Louis. And as he recalled this, his faint hope of meeting his trusted friend and learning all the cruel details, faded away.

"Better delay than let those bunglers take hold of the case to cover up all traces by their blind potterings!" he sternly mused.

It was curious how persistently the beautiful face of Harriet Haylock would intrude upon his efforts to think and reason, to run over his long list of enemies, made thus by his efforts to aid justice and right, and settle upon those who were most likely to have shared in this terrible blow at his heart. Strange, because reason told him that she could not possibly have been in town at the hour this cruel deed must have been perpetrated. Only for that—

And Craig Dairmid, too! Convict No. 1213! Why could not he banish his strong, priestly yet evil countenance away for good and all?

Was his attempted escape part and parcel of that murderous blow? Was it to give him other work to do while the convict made his flight sure and recapture uncertain?

Never before had Dan Dunn felt it so difficult to concentrate his thoughts. Never before had he received such a telling blow, where his feelings were deepest, most tender.

If he only had a clew to fasten his brain upon!

Was it always to be like this? Would his wits grow dull and his nerves fail him just when he needed them most sorely? Would he be like other men, capable of ministering unto others but incapable of aiding himself in such a sore extremity?

More than once he started in almost terror as he found his fingers fiercely pinching his flesh, trying to rouse himself from some hideous nightmare fancy! Had Varley spoken truth while meaning a jest? Was his brain yielding to the terrible shock? Was this indeed lunacy?

Those long, dreary hours were never entirely forgotten by the man who lived through them with his brain in such a mad, dizzying whirl. The train seemed to be crawling so slowly that, even when he gazed fiercely out at the flying landscape through the gathering shades of evening, he could not convince himself to the contrary. Nor could he alter this belief when, as the train whistled at each station, he compared his watch with time-table. All lied! Everything and every one was joining in the awful conspiracy against him! All were trying to grant the accursed assassins time in which to cover their

crimson tracks and make their flight untraceable.

"But I'll unearth them though they burrow to the very heart of the globe!" he sternly repeated over and over in his mind.

And as he noted how near they were drawing to the station where this train passed the up-Express he grew still more restless.

Would there be news on that train? Would the early edition of the evening papers have caught to say about the crime? If so—if they, with true vulture scent, had struck the bloody trail, would their comments offer him any substantial clew?

After this Dan Dunn could fix his dizzy brain on nothing else, and he was the first one to snatch a paper from the news agent, who at once began crying out about the awful murder in true professional style.

Dan Dunn never heard him, never heeded the hurrying crowd at the station. He tore open the paper and then reeled back with a choking cry of angry horror. For, in staring letters, he beheld the name of his betrothed bride accused of murdering his father!

CHAPTER VII.

HARLEQUIN HAT AND AN ALIBI.

A STRONG hand closed on Dan Dunn's arm, probably saving him from an ugly fall backward from the platform as that horrible calumny met his gaze, and Horace Varley led the half-stupefied man back into the car, settling him into a seat before rushing back to attend to his duties.

The stricken man seemed hardly conscious of this kindness, and that horrified and bewildered expression never once left his face or his eyes until, the Express once more steaming swiftly onward, Varley came and sat down beside him, strong sympathy in his voice.

"Is it so bad, Dunn? Is there no chance of an error in the report? These reporters are so hungry for a sensation that they often build a mountain out of a mole-hill, you know!"

Dan Dunn started, catching his breath sharply as he turned his ghastly face toward the speaker. He did not catch words, but the strong sympathy expressed in that frank face was enough to rouse him out of that sickening stupor, for, like many another strong, self-reliant man, anything like pity in one of his own sex was unbearable.

"You mean well, pard, but—if you'd only let me wrestle it out by my lonesome self," he muttered, forcing a smile that sent a shiver through the veins of the conductor.

He turned his face toward the window, and, after a brief hesitation, Varley left the seat beside him. Powerful as was his sympathy for this sorely-stricken man, he knew that Dunn was right; silence was greater kindness than speech, just then.

Yet he had wrought more good than he realized. That terrible stupor was broken, never to return again. Dan Dunn was beginning to waken, his stunned brain to resume its workings.

He found the paper still crumpled in his tightly-clinched hand. He smoothed out the folds, even pausing to note if his fingers were trembling. And then, by the dim light of the lamps behind and above him, he forced himself to begin at the beginning and slowly read that awful story through to the end.

It was a curious mixture of truth and fiction, hastily shaped in the brief time allowed the "enterprising reporter," and each sentence seemed to stab the detective to the very heart.

It told of the murder, and asserted that the victim had left him undeniable proof that the red-handed assassin was none other than the young and beautiful daughter of one of St. Louis's most popular veterans, Major Nelson Mayne. And it was also declared that immediate steps had been taken for the arrest of the criminal, Zelna Mayne.

Twice over Dan Dunn forced himself to read these malice-tinged lines, and their very bitterness served to sting him into at least a semblance of his usual self.

His loved one an assassin? His betrothed bride the foul murderess of his father? That was a horrible calumny, and if so, might not the whole account prove a baseless canard?

It was only a fleeting hope, for then he recalled the dispatch signed by faithful Turnbull, calling him home in such haste. There must be some truth in the report, but not that—not Zelna. He would as soon doubt his mother in heaven!

He was striving to still further clear his brain, to concentrate his thoughts, when a strange force seemed to draw his eyes to the right, across the narrow aisle and a few seats behind him. Almost unconsciously he obeyed the impulse, and his gaze rested vacantly upon the figure of a woman seated by herself. She was holding a paper—it fluttered slightly as one daintily-gloved hand lifted to push back a veil.

Dan Dunn started sharply as the scales seemed to drop from his eyes, for he recognized the woman from whom he had parted at the depot in Jefferson City, only a few short hours ago: Mrs. Harriet Haylock!

Again the paper fluttered, this time unmis-

takably as a signal, and those big blue eyes seemed to beg him to approach. Harlequin Hat even more plainly indicated her desire, by moving closer to the window, one hand deftly touching the vacant space at her side.

With that recognition returned something of the haunting doubts which had troubled him before, and his detective instinct sprang into active life again. What if *here* should be the very clew for which he had been eating out his heart?

The woman furtively shook her head as though reading his mind, and he saw a grave, even sympathetic shade creep over her beautiful face. She fluttered the paper once more as though to fix his attention upon it. She touched the staring head-lines, then repeated her negative nod.

Dan Dunn allowed his eyes to wander down the fairly filled coach, but he failed to discover the face of a friend, or even another acquaintance among the passengers. All were strangers, and not one among them appeared to have noticed his actions while stunned by that awful blow.

His brain was growing clearer with the passage of each minute, and the vague belief that Harlequin Hattie *must* have had part or parcel in this dastardly deed helped to restore his nerves, making him once more the cool, keen, watchful hunter of men, in outward semblance at least.

Not until he felt himself fully able to cope with this evil and cunning if beautiful woman, did Dan Dunn give sign of recognition or make a move toward gratifying her evident wish for an interview. Then he left his seat and quickly settled down beside the ex-actress.

"I thank you, Mr. Dunn," she murmured in tones barely loud enough for his ears to interpret aright. "I would have come to you, instead, only I feared—I didn't know but what you—"

Her tones broke, and only her great eyes, lustrous with unshed tears, completed the sentence.

"You dreaded a scene, Hattie?" quietly suggested Dan Dunn, not a trace of emotion in his voice or upon his handsome face as his eyes steadily met her lustrous orbs. "Why should you, if you had done me no wrong? Am I such an unreasonable monster, then?"

"I feared—I didn't know but what— Daniel Tostivan," her voice growing earnest and her eyes glowing vividly as they fully met his steady gaze. "As high Heaven hears me now, I've had no finger in this awful bit of work!"

"Have I accused you, Mrs. Haylock?"

"Not in so many words, and I hope you never will."

"I never shall, unless I find some convincing proof of your playing a hand in the black game, Hattie. Then—well, I may have to look up your record once more."

"You will find nothing new, Daniel," forcing a slight smile, but which vanished to leave her face looking graver and older than before.

"Was it simply to assure me of this fact that you invited my presence, Mrs. Haylock?"

"Partly, Mr. Dunn," giving him the name by which she had known him longest. "I tried to put myself in your place. I tried to figure out just what direction your thoughts would naturally take in such a case. And while the opportunity offered itself I thought it only prudent on my part to make the most of it. Can you blame me?"

"Not on that score, Mrs. Haylock. Self-defense is one of the first laws of nature; I remember writing that as one of my first examples, years ago while a careless, happy schoolboy!"

He laughed softly as he uttered the words, but it was but ghastly mirth at best, and the woman, hardened though she was by a life of reckless misdeeds, shivered a little as she drew back a bit. She felt that this man would be far less dangerous were he to rave and threaten, to moan and grieve, instead of bearing his double blow with the assumption of mirth.

"I know something of what you must have suffered, Mr. Dunn," she ventured, forcing her eyes to meet his once more. "I, too, have gone through the dark valley, as no man should know better than yourself."

"Your husband, Hattie?"

Mrs. Haylock bowed assent, her face looking paler, older with the memory thus revived.

For a little while there was silence between the twain. Each was thinking of the past, and each rapidly reviewing the incidents in which both had played a prominent part.

Those incidents had occurred at another Western city far up the same great river near whose bank they were now swiftly rolling along. Then Harlequin Hat was as eager to avoid as she had recently been anxious to attract the professional hunter of criminals. Then, she and her allies were playing a bold game for a vast fortune, with Dan Dunn pitted against them, almost single-handed.

The right triumphed in the end, and, with disaster, came worse for this woman. The only man she had ever loved was drowned while trying to baffle capture, and with him went out her last faint spark of humanity.

She, herself, was tried and sentenced to serve the State for a long term of years, but, thanks to certain powerful influence which she found means to command, she secured a pardon after less than a year's imprisonment. Her comrade in crime, and the next in importance, so far as the Coventry case was concerned, fared less well. Before the gates of the Penitentiary closed behind him his name had been Dr. Craig Dairmid. Ever since that hour his title had been "No. 1,213."

"You know that, as I lay with crippled leg, across the bosom of my dead husband, Dan Dunn," Mrs. Haylock forced herself to utter, her tones perceptibly unsteady, "I swore to bitterly avenge him. I swore I'd never know a moment's peace until I had brought you just as low as my darling lay then! And I meant every word I uttered, too!"

"Yet you think it strange that I should think of you in an hour like this?" demanded the detective, striving with all his power to read what lay back of those great blue eyes.

"Did I say so? To the contrary, Daniel. In your place I should entertain much the same thoughts, and spare no pains to make sure they were right—or wholly unfounded. And to spare you all the trouble possible, I called you here to lay my record openly before you."

"That hardly fits in with your oath, does it, Hattie?"

"I am older than I was then. And I trust I am a bit wiser, if no better. I knew that your thoughts would naturally revert to my old vow, if only because a curious chance brought us together on this day of all others. And so—"

"You made but a brief pause in Jefferson, Mrs. Haylock!"

"Why should I stay over?" her fair brow slightly wrinkling as though with pain. "I had hardly reached my hotel when I heard of the escape and killing at the Pen. That ended my business in town, and I at once took the down train. I intended to have left it at Hermann, but I saw you risk your life to catch the train, and more than half believed you were hunting for me!"

"Why should I do that, Hattie, if your hands are clean?"

Mrs. Haylock shrugged her shapely shoulders significantly.

"Once stained, what can ever clean them, in such eyes as yours, Dan Dunn? Once a crook, always a crook, seems to be a favorite motto with men of your guild. And knowing this—well, I thought it best to give you the chance to interview me, if you really wished it. I knew it must come, sooner or later, if you had set your heart upon it, and I never wish to feel myself hunted by you again, Daniel!"

There was more of truth than of simulation in the shiver with which this sentence was emphasized, and the detective smiled faintly. At any other time he would have felt flattered by the compliment, coming from such an accomplished adventuress as this.

He made no response in words, but his eyes lowered to the paper which still lay upon her lap. Harlequin Hat readily comprehended his meaning, and her voice was softer as she uttered:

"I know, now. It is sad—sadder tidings than even I could find heart to wish you, Mr. Dunn, even though the death of my husband lies at your door. And so—I'll simply ask you to listen to this much: For the past three days I have been living at Hermann, at the hotel, while my little cottage is being made ready for me. You can easily prove my words true, if you care to take the trouble."

CHAPTER VIII.

PROPOSING AN ARMISTICE.

DAN DUNN smiled as he gazed into her lustrous eyes, just then seeming as frank and honest as those of an innocent babe in arms.

"I may take the trouble to look up your record, Hattie, and that of your gang as well," he said, bringing the conclusion out with undisguised significance, watching keenly the while.

Did a tremor run through her queenly figure at that? Did her face turn a shade paler, and a fleeting glow fill her eyes? Or was it but the flickering of the candle above their heads?

"My gang, do you say?" her tones clear and distinct, though subdued so as to confine their speech to themselves. "The day for that is past and gone, Mr. Dunn. Though I dare say you'll be loth to believe it, I've led a straight life ever since bidding adieu to the Pen. So far as I know the old gang of Night Hawks no longer exists. Certainly I have never joined in their councils since—since Horace died."

There was no pretense about the twin tears that dropped upon the paper in her lap, however much there might have been in her words. Harlequin Hattie was not yet past the power of weeping whenever she recalled the death of the one man whom her wayward heart really owned as master and lover in one.

She seemed ashamed of that bit of feminine weakness, though, and pretended to stoop to recover something which she had not dropped, under cover of the action dashing the moisture from her eyes. And they held a half-defiant glow as she again faced the detective to say:

"Of course I don't expect you to take my bare word for it, Mr. Dunn. It would be against your creed to trust a criminal, even though that wrong-doer had repented in sackcloth and ashes for an eternity! I even ask you to trace my record, as you call it, and if you can put a finger on any deed of wrong, committed since I received my pardon from the Pen, show me no mercy. Send me back to eat my heart out in that den of torture and infamy!"

"Suppose I take you at your word, Mrs. Haylock?"

"I ask you to do so," her tones growing less supplicating as her great eyes glowed brightly. "The past is past. Once I thought I would never suffer its memories to dim until I had bitterly avenged my husband. Once I thought I would ask nothing better of fate than to stand within arm's length of you, as I do now, with a true blade in my hand—see!"

And a deft motion caused the jeweled hilt of a slender poniard to peep from the lace at her bosom.

Dan Dunn smiled grimly, but with a strange fire in his eyes.

"You thought better of it, Harlequin? You believed that you could best pierce my heart by striking through another?"

"I even thought of that, during those first horrible hours in my prison-cell, Mr. Dunn," was the quiet response, as she pushed the glittering weapon back into its snug hiding-place. "And if my release had come sooner, if it had not been delayed until the hot heart felt dead within my bosom, I might have yielded to the temptation. As it is—listen to me, and try to think I am telling the truth, Daniel," she added, her tones suddenly growing softer, more gentle, but none the less earnest.

"I swear to you by the unhonored grave of my husband that I have taken no part, directly or indirectly, in this sad affair. I don't pretend to say that I'm too good or too high-minded for such a thing; if I could have dealt you a blow, in person, murder wouldn't have many terrors for me! But I'll never deal the blow through an innocent heart in the attempt to square accounts for Horace."

"If I could only believe you, Mrs. Haylock!" muttered the detective, strongly impressed by her evident earnestness, yet loth to abandon the only clew—right or wrong—which he could grasp just then.

"You will have to believe me if you ever get at the full facts of this tragedy, Daniel," with a faint smile flitting across her face. "I will remind you of your doubts when I ask you to procure me a ticket for the execution of your father's slayer."

For some minutes there was silence between them. Dan Dunn looked moodily at the floor at his feet. Mrs. Haylock pressed her fevered brows against the cool glass, though it was too dark without for her to see aught but gloom.

Had she spoken the simple truth, or was this but another of her adroit as bold maneuvers? Was it simply an effort to throw him off the right scent, or, rather, to prevent him from ever striking it?

Had she indeed consented to let the past be past? Had she grown to count her own life and liberty above her once vicious lust for vengeance upon the man who had hunted her husband to death?

If he could only see clear! If his brain would only work with something like its old cool, keen, unerring certainty!

The woman was the first to break the silence, turning her head and attracting his attention by softly touching his arm with a gloved hand.

"Mr. Dunn, you will not think too hardly of me if, despite your great trouble, I persist in talking?" she said, softly, an appealing light in her lustrous eyes. "If it will save both you and me trouble and time, may I not speak out frankly?"

"Am I your keeper, Hattie?" flashed the detective.

"I've heard many a false word spoken in dead earnest, Daniel," with a cold, hard laugh that was intended for his ears alone. "You have been worse than my keeper through all these months!"

"By which you mean—"

"That my liberty has, after all, been even less than the old country ticket-of-leave!" she flashed, strong emotion in her face and voice. "That I have been living in a nightmare ever since I stepped outside the Pen—all through you, Dan Dunn!"

"I hardly follow you, Mrs. Haylock."

"Will not, rather!" she flashed, swiftly. "I knew you never forgot. I knew you were aware of my pardon. I knew you would expect me to put my mad vow of vengeance into execution at the earliest possible moment. I don't pretend to say that I wouldn't have done this, at that time, if a favorable opportunity offered itself. But how was I to gain that, with you upon your guard? I soon saw that it was worse than madness, and I swear to you that I gave over the idea for good and all."

"And the nightmare, Harriet?"

"Began then, and it has not ended yet! I have lived in torment ever since I received my

pardon, because I knew there were black spots on my old record, sufficient to send me back to that living hell. And every morning when I opened my eyes, it was to wonder whether the sun would go down without your striking me another blow.

"It's a part of the penalty, you know, Mrs. Haylock!" gravely.

"Is it never ending?" leaning forward until their eyes met and her warm breath fairly fanned his face in her eagerness. "Must I always live like this, Dan Dunn? Will you never believe I have left all crookedness forever behind me?"

"When the leopard changes his spots, Hattie!"

The woman sunk back against the window, her eyes closing, her lips tightly compressed to smother the sob that rose in her throat. Dan Dunn gazed at her pale yet still beautiful face with a dull curiosity. Was she really in earnest? He could not believe this, even yet, knowing as he did how thoroughly perverted had been her past life, what a perfect actress she was, when off the mimic stage. With a tithe of the same talent displayed on the boards, she would have set the world afire.

"I'll make one more effort, Mr. Dunn," the woman said, once more rallying, her tones calm, composed, though her eyes still held a hunted light that told of a troubled mind. "I ask you to look upon my record since I received my pardon. If you can find one act of crookedness, or even find me associating with crooks, I'll ask no further mercy. If not—let me tell you the one hope I've dared to cherish.

"I have bought me a little place in Hermann. I mean to settle down there, if you will permit me, to live in quiet and peace, while fitting myself for another attempt at stage life. Not the old line; I have grown older and wiser and—I even dare to hope that I have learned the true secret of art, since those days, through love and loss.

"Is it so much to beg? Only permission to live an honest life, without the haunting, heart-sickening dread of feeling your grip on my shoulder as you show me a warrant—my death-warrant it would surely prove, too!"

Despite his past knowledge of this woman, and despite his natural disbelief in her protested reformation, Dan Dunn could not maintain his cold air of skepticism in the face of such a pitiful appeal, though he felt a vague shame at his weakness in admitting as much. Maybe his own terrible grief had something to do with it.

He gazed long and earnestly into the woman's eyes, striving to read the truth which might be hidden behind them. Unflinchingly Harlequin Hattie met his scrutiny, her face pale but composed, her eyes steady, though filled with mute prayers for lenience. If she was acting a part, she had perfectly prepared herself to pass examination.

"You don't ask me to give over looking up your record, then?"

"Just the contrary," was the swift response.

"I invite it!"

"Then I'll give you the pledge you require," was the quiet decision, as the Soft-Hand Detective drew back a little. "If I find you have taken no part in this double blow at me, directly or indirectly, I promise never to trouble you again, unless you perform some act which, in the usual course of business, I should be called upon to investigate. Then, of course, I must perform my plain duty."

Harlequin Hattie impulsively caught his hand between hers, half-lifting it to her lips as though to seal the bond by a kiss; but Dan Dunn would not go that far. He freed his hand, and was about to rise to his feet, when Mrs. Haylock impulsively caught his arm, her face flushing, then growing pale again after a curious fashion.

"I wish—I want to show you that I am grateful for this boon, Mr. Dunn, but—"

"It is your right, madam, and no favor. If you are living straight, you need thank no one for not molesting you."

"I have read this—this sad account," Mrs. Haylock persisted, nervously fingering the paper in her lap. "If I dared say what I have been thinking—"

"Give me a clue to that crime, and I'll pay you any reward you may ask!" flashed the detective, his eyes all aglow.

"Even if—it should—I can't do it!" with sudden passion in her tones, subdued by caution though they still were. "You'd never believe me, and you'll get at the truth all the sooner by trusting to what clues you may find when you reach town. But—"

She ceased abruptly, opening her pocket-book and drawing therefrom a card with a printed name and address. Below this she added a few words written with the tiny jeweled pencil pendant to her watch-chain, then handed the bit of pasteboard to the detective, saying, hurriedly:

"Keep this, please, and if you ever want to learn more about the past life of—of Major Nelson Mayne, call at the address I've penciled below my name."

The whistle sounded just at that moment, and

Harlequin Hat caught up her few belongings and deftly slipped past the startled detective, bending her head to whisper hastily:

"I'll stop over here. If you want to find me, call at Hermann!"

He reached out a hand to detain her, but was too late. The train was already slackening its pace, and Harlequin Hat was on her way to the front of the car. He might follow, but was it worth while? Might it not create a scene? And then—as she said, he could find her when wanted, even if she did not intend returning to the sleepy little city of vines and wines.

He gave the card but a passing glance, noting that the address penciled upon it was across the river, in East St. Louis, then sunk down in his seat, shading his face with his hat, trying to think—trying to divine what covert meaning underlay Harlequin Hat's last words.

Could it be that she knew aught about the Maynes? Could she, too, be trying to cast suspicion upon his betrothed bride?

CHAPTER IX.

DEFENDING HIS DAUGHTER.

UNFORTUNATELY for the hopes entertained by Robert Turnbull, in order to regain his residence by the shortest route, Major Nelson Mayne was obliged to pass by the other entrance to the building, where the eager crowd was constantly shifting, nearly every one of whom had a separate account to give of the murder.

That there had been a murder was pretty well established by this time, and just as the veteran fairly struck the sidewalk the name of Lapier Tostivan began to spread through the excited collection.

Just who first mentioned it, or from whence sprung the earliest intimation of the terrible accusation which the dead man had left behind him as a legacy of vengeance to his friends, no one could say with anything like certainty; but such were the facts.

Major Mayne caught the name of the man whom, with or without reason he deemed his bitterest enemy, and coupled in such a manner with others that for the instant he forgot his own troubles. He stared in open-eyed amazement at the surging crowd, but before he could say or do aught, a dapper little fellow pounced upon him, notebook and pencil in hand, his tongue running glibly:

"Major Mayne, delighted to find you so soon. Terrible affair, but the plain, unadorned truth can't make it any worse. Give it in your own words, corrected by proof, and that's heap more'n any of those cheap-jay hustlers'll agree to. Scratch it off as we walk, if you're in a rush, major, and—"

"I don't happen to have the honor of knowing you, sir," severely began the veteran, retreating from the pencil-point with which the ardent disciple of news was punctuating his swift sentences.

"Jones, on *Evening Star* staff. Excuse card, but—give you a perfectly straight deal, major, and double thanks if you'll induce the lady to confine her defense in print solely to my paper, for—"

"What the foul fiend are you driving at, anyway?"

"Too late to stand on ceremony, and your daughter'll be charged with the killing of old Tostivan, anyway, and—"

The reporter left that sentence unfinished. At last the veteran comprehended what he was trying to get at, and a wave of honest indignation swept over him. He caught the eager item-seeker by the shoulders and shook him in the air, much as a mastiff might shake an impudent terrier, then flung him to the ground, planting one sturdy foot between his shoulders, pinning him fast while his cane rose and fell swiftly, fortunately alighting on no vital spot.

"You foul-mouthed cur!" shouted the veteran, heedless of the surging crowd, attracted by the wild cries of the reporter. "I'll break every bone in your vile carcass for daring to—to—"

His voice choked, but his arm lost none of its vigor, and the too eager representative of the press would have fared but ill only for the swift coming of Captain Drake, whose muscular arms and broad shoulders unceremoniously forced a passage through the crowding mass.

"Don't you think you've paid him off, major?" the officer said as he caught the descending cane in his hand, deftly twisting it from its owner's grasp, and at the same time setting the beaten reporter free from that heavy foot. "Don't crowd, gentlemen, if you please!" with a stern glance over his shoulder that widened the distance in that direction with almost ludicrous celerity.

"I'll break every bone in his slanderous carcass, sir!" gasped the indignant man as he glared after the hastily-retreating news-hunter.

"How dared he bring my daughter—"

"I wouldn't mention names just now, Major Mayne," quietly interposed the captain, locking arms with the veteran and moving toward the upper entrance to the building, just as Robert Turnbull gained the street by way of the lower flight. "After all, it's what he's paid for, and though the hard news might have been broken

to you a little more considerably, I doubt if anything could have softened the shock."

"What! you don't mean to insinuate—"

"Must it come now, captain?" hurriedly demanded Turnbull, joining them, pity mingling with anxiety in his honest face.

"The street's full of it," frowned the officer with a glance back toward the excited crowd. "I'd give a month's pay to know just how!"

No need of more definite speech, just then. Though the crowd kept at a respectful distance, their words could be caught, broken by everybody trying to speak at once, but enough could be caught to tell that already the name of Zelna Mayne was being coupled with that of the murdered man, and with that accusation in blood on the wall above.

"It's a lie—foul as hell itself!" panted the poor father, his face almost livid with anger and ill-defined fears as he caught those cruel words, then saw how grave and troubled were the faces of the two men who gently forced him into the narrow passage and up the steps.

"I'll stake my life on that, sir!" earnestly uttered Turnbull; but the captain maintained silence.

Major Mayne no longer resisted. He knew now that there must be something in all this, and though he could not doubt the perfect innocence of his idolized child, her strange absence from home helped to unnerve him for the minute.

Only for those helping hands he could never have reached the top of the long flight. His limbs seemed benumbed, and his brain burned as if his blood was on fire.

"It will kill him!" muttered Turnbull, turning still paler as Captain Drake led the way along the corridor, evidently bound for the office in which Lapier Tostivan had met his death.

"Not if your theory is right, Robert," with just the ghost of a smile flitting across his stern face.

Turnbull said nothing more. He was hardly in a fit condition just then to cope with a man of the captain's caliber, though he realized that any violent effort to keep Major Mayne from being taken to that chamber would only deepen the suspicions already working in the busy brain of the police captain.

In response to his knock Coroner Eppstien opened the door, and the major was taken inside, then left standing alone directly before that gruesome spectacle.

Captain Drake frowned just a bit as he keenly watched what followed. There was no acting in that start and recoil, in the look of pitying horror which flashed into that broad face. However it might be with his daughter, the father was surely innocent of part or lot in that dastardly crime.

"Merciful father!" gasped the veteran, his tones hardly articulate as he recognized the corpse of the man upon whose head he had felt tempted to call curses only a few minutes earlier. "Dead—"

He stopped short, glaring rather than gazing at that awful accusation printed in gory letters on the wall above the murdered man's head. He dashed a trembling hand across his eyes as though to clear his vision. He bent forward, the great veins starting out across his temples, his face slowly purpling, until Turnbull moved to his side, fearful of an apoplectic stroke.

That friendly touch seemed to break the spell, for with an effort Major Mayne drew himself erect, tossing back his head, drawing a full breath, then hoarsely crying as one hand pointed to the red charge:

"May Satan forever roast the man whose finger dared trace that atrocious calumny! May—did you bring me here to show me that base lie, gentlemen?" turning upon the trio with suddenly forced composure. "Did you place even so much credence in it, Robert Turnbull?"

"I said from the first that it was a terrible mistake, major."

"A lie, false as hell, but not a mistake, sir!" flashed the veteran, with fierce emphasis, his eyes glowing redly as they turned toward the corpse. "He never spared us in life. He tried to strike us a death-blow even as his own life-spark flickered out!"

"Through the opening made by this bit of steel, major," quietly informed Captain Drake, the broken blade lying on his brown palm where the veteran could not mistake his meaning.

It was another cruel stroke, but as one who wished to get at the plain truth, as a man sworn to preserve order and bring wrong doers to justice, the man felt himself justified in using such means as lay at hand. And while the major was staring in speechless amazement at the body of the murdered man, a whispered word to Coroner Eppstien was enough to procure this significant bit of evidence for immediate use.

Major Mayne turned still paler as he gazed down upon the broken blade, held so that the bright light streaming in through the windows enabled him to follow the dainty tracing which coiled about the blood-dimmed fragment.

"Surely you never saw this before, Major Mayne?" queried the captain.

"Often, sir," was the instant response, as he

firmly met that keen gaze. "Or one very much like it. I picked it up on the field at Gettysburg, after the battle was over."

"And gave it away, as a memento, perhaps?"

"I never gave it away! I kept it myself, as a sort of relic. How it came into your possession, sir, I cannot pretend to explain. But if you dare to even insinuate that my—that it came here by—"

"Don't speak too hastily, major," interposed Turnbull. "You had better say nothing at all, until Mr. Dunn can come back."

Mayne flung off the restraining hand, his eyes flashing with fierce anger as they turned toward the dead man and the red accusation just above his head.

"Did he—did Lapier Tostivan write that base slander?"

"We found it there, just as you see, major," Drake answered.

"And he was the father of the man you call Dan Dunn?" turning to Turnbull, cold and even dignified as he added: "If by waiting for that man I could blot out all this vile mass of viler lies, I would scorn to stoop so low! As his son—as the spawn of the wretch who has never spared me or mine—Dan Dunn is worse than nothing to us from this hour on!"

"And why did he hate us so bitterly? Why—unless because I served my country in her time of need as best I knew how, while he, Southern born and Southern bred, was doing all he could to destroy the Union for which I fought and suffered!"

"I have nothing to conceal, gentlemen. My life is open to you. All I ask is the treatment due one honest man from another. But if any one of you dare to even insinuate against my daughter aught of—"

Swift footsteps were heard mounting the stairs, and all eyes turned toward the door on the panel of which came a sharp rapping. Captain Drake sprang to the barrier, one hand on the key as he demanded:

"Who are you and what do you want?"

"Kimberley, your Honor," was the prompt response.

"On what business?"

"To report on this Mayne affair, captain."

A shock seemed to run through the four living men in the office at this announcement, and Turnbull instinctively gave the arm of the major a warning grip, while Captain Drake flushed perceptibly as he gave a glance over his shoulder.

Though he himself had given orders to send men at once to the residence of the girl accused of murder, he had not paused to learn who was sent, and so permitted the truth to come out before he wished.

It was too late now to regret his haste, and he turned the key, admitting the officer, who saluted his superior, without even glancing at the others in the room.

"I followed orders to the very letter, captain. We were just in time to see the lady entering the front door. Manson saw her face, and recognized it positively."

"Well?"

"I left the others on guard, with word to prevent any person quitting the place, then came direct to you for further orders. Shall we arrest Miss Mayne at once?"

"I'll brain the scoundrel who dares lay finger on my daughter!" thundered the major, snatching up a heavy chair as he spoke.

CHAPTER X.

A FAULT IN THE TRAIL.

THE heavy office-chair seemed like a feather in his enraged grasp, and there was the fire of madness in his eyes as he burst out in defense of his idolized child.

Coroner Eppstien tripped and rolled headlong as he dodged out of danger. Turnbull even shrunk back, but not so Captain Drake. With a cold smile on his face, his eyes steadily meeting that fierce glare, he stepped across the danger line, not even lifting a hand from his side, his tones cool and equable as he uttered:

"Don't make matters any worse, Major Mayne. If your daughter is innocent, you should jump at the chance to have her case thoroughly investigated by competent men. As for braining—this is not a field of battle, my dear fellow!"

"He spoke of arresting—"

"But only spoke of it, bear in mind," easily lifting a hand and letting it rest lightly on the half-crazed man's arm, but making no attempt to deprive him of his weapon by force. "Still, if you refuse to listen to reason, I'll arrest both her and her father, major."

Where force and threats would surely have failed without harm to one or the other, cool speech and unshrinking bravery prevailed. Major Mayne lowered the chair to the floor, his head bowing, his chest panting painfully as he gasped:

"It will kill her—even as it is—is killing me now!"

"Not if she is innocent, major," soothingly responded the captain, gently moving the stricken man further from the chair. "You believe she is free of guilt, and I most earnestly hope that may prove true. Still, you can't

blame us for performing our sworn duty. A man has met his death by violent means. He leaves behind him a serious charge—"

"A lie—false as hell itself!" flashed the stricken man.

"Which must be proven a lie, then," nodded the captain. "Shall we investigate it quietly, keeping all we possibly can from the public while so doing, or will you force us to openly arrest both yourself and your daughter, the one because thus accused, the other because he lets his honest indignation turn him into a blundering idiot?"

"It must be one or the other, dear sir," muttered Turnbull, gently interposing. "For her dear sake try to make the best of it. We'll do our level best to keep all quiet until the real criminal is caught."

"Speak for yourselves, shentlemens!" growled the coroner from the corner where he was busily rubbing his bruises. "As for me, I will nod-dings keep hide—I will my sworn duty perform right away—so!"

"Don't rough him, major," swiftly whispered the captain. "I'll engage to keep him from arresting or molesting your daughter, if you'll act white and come with me to your own house."

There was no reply in words, but the poor man made no further resistance as Drake nodded to Kimberley, who promptly opened the door, and all save the obstinate coroner left the room. Another word sent Kimberley out to call a close carriage, bringing it to the upper entrance where the crowd was likely to prove less troublesome.

This was quickly performed, and bidding Turnbull accompany Kimberley and the major, Captain Drake descended the other flight of steps to make sure his men remained on guard, and to put as complete a check on Coroner Eppstien as lay in his power.

This accomplished, the captain hurried around the block to meet the closed carriage, entering and bidding the driver hasten direct to the residence of Major Nelson Mayne.

The retired street was comparatively deserted when they drew up before the plain, two-story brick house, and only the uniformed men, who saluted their superior as he alighted, were to be seen.

Captain Drake interchanged a few hasty words with one of these men while Turnbull assisted the major to alight. There was little to report. No person had attempted to enter or leave the building, and only an old, soberly-dressed woman had been seen at one of the front windows since the young lady entered.

The very same, beyond a doubt, who now rushed agitatedly down the front steps to greet the major with:

"Oh, sir, I'm so glad! I mean sorry—she's out of her head and moaning so pitifully and would you go for the doctor or send for I didn't dare even—oh, dear me!"

With a hoarse, inarticulate cry the major broke away from the restraining hand of Turnbull, rushing up the steps and into the house without waiting to hear the end of that eager, hysterical speech.

"Look after him, Turnbull," nodded Drake, himself checking the agitated housekeeper as she made to follow, holding her long enough to extract the name and address of the family physician.

He frowned slightly as he heard the name, and instead of repeating it to Kimberley, he said:

"Go fetch Surgeon Branksome as quickly as possible. Take the hack and don't spare horse-flesh, mind you!"

The officer leaped into the carriage and was whirled rapidly away from the spot on his mission. Captain Drake paused a moment longer to instruct his men to admit no person save the surgeon, without first summoning him to the door, then entered the building.

Instinct seemed to serve him well, for with hardly any perceptible delay or calculation he made his way to the second story, pausing at a closed door. From beyond this came sounds of muffled sobbings, now and then broken by a sweeter, clearer voice.

The captain was not above listening when there was a possible point to be made, but he failed to find his reward in this case. Now and then he could understand a word, but it was disconnected, and gave him no clew to the dark mystery which enshrouded the murder of Lapier Tostivan.

The door opened suddenly, and a faint flush came into his bronzed face as Robert Turnbull confronted him. In silence the friend of Dan Dunn stepped aside to make way for him to enter, but Captain Drake paused on the threshold.

Major Nelson Mayne was kneeling at the side of a low bed, his trembling fingers clasping the feverish hand of his daughter against whose fair name had been written such an awful charge. His bloodshot eyes were fixed upon that flushing, paling, ever-changing face, as it moved restlessly upon her pillow, great tears rolling down his cheeks and his mighty chest heaving painfully as he fought hard to subdue the choking sobs of grief and fear.

Even in such a fever Zelna Mayne possessed a lovely face; dark as though Southern blood flowed richly in her veins, with brilliant red lips, a tiny dimple in her chin, arched brows, black as jet and finely traced as though by a pencil point, her slightly curling hair throwing the rich loveliness of her face into stronger relief by its midnight blackness.

"Is that the face of a murderess, captain?" softly whispered Robert Turnbull, his own eyes glowing vividly as he watched the face of the police officer.

"It is the face of an angel, only lacking reason," muttered Drake, as he fell back silently, but adding, in a slightly altered tone as Robert Turnbull drew the door gently to behind them both: "But so was Lucifer before the fall!"

The little detective flushed hotly at this cynical remark, and his tones trembled with anger and resentment as he muttered:

"You regulars accuse us of being man-hunters through pure liking for blood-money, captain, but the most inveterate sleuth in seventeen States couldn't be more bloodthirsty than you show yourself by that! The little lady is pure as an angel fresh down from Heaven, and you'd know as much if you could only crowd your prejudice aside long enough to show yourself at least half white!"

Captain Drake smiled grimly at this. He rather liked the little man for so stoutly defending the promised bride of his friend and master.

"I can't quite forget what that dying finger traced on the wall, Robert," he said, quietly, as they descended the stairs, at the foot of which the housekeeper, Betsy Morris by name, was anxiously waiting them. "Would a dying man insure his eternal torment by making a false accusation like that?"

"If he did make it!"

"Who else could?" was the swift query.

There was no response. Had he been less deeply interested in the sad tragedy, Turnbull might have been a better defender. As it was, that same question was ever haunting his own throbbing brain.

Captain Drake now laid bare a fresh phase of his many-sided character by the gentle, soothing manner in which he worked the old lady into comparative composure, even while adroitly pumping her of all she could tell him concerning the strange absence and stranger return of her young mistress.

That was not much more than he had already learned, partly through the account of Major Mayne himself, and by means of his men.

Mrs. Morris had retired early the evening before, and, like her master, had supposed of course that Miss Zelna was safely asleep in her own chamber, up to the moment when, in obedience to Major Mayne, she had gone to summon her mistress to breakfast. The bed had not been disturbed throughout the night, and her mistress's walking wraps were missing when she looked for them after reporting her absence.

The first tidings she had, after that, was hardly an hour before, when Zelna came in, to sink at the foot of the stairs, seemingly very ill. And Mrs. Morris was telling how she assisted the poor child up to her chamber, when a subdued rap at the front door caused Captain Drake to spring hastily to the entrance, greeting a grave, middle-aged gentleman whom Robert Turnbull recognized as a police surgeon, named Branksome.

Captain Drake at once led the surgeon upstairs, hastily giving him an outline of the case as they proceeded, then parting from him at the door of the chamber with:

"Find out all you can, Branksome, without too plainly showing your hand. I fancied there was something more than any ordinary sickness the matter with her, at first glance."

"I'll do my best, captain," was the quiet response.

"Do! And then bring your report to me in the parlor below. Time is worth much, just now, bear in mind."

The surgeon bowed as he entered the room, closing the door behind him. Captain Drake paused just long enough to be sure Major Mayne made no objection to the attendance of a strange physician, then returned to Turnbull and Mrs. Morris.

The former was closely questioning the agitated old lady about the past night and the morning just spent, and Captain Drake did not interfere. Above all else he wanted to get at the simple truth, but he had long since decided that the solution of the mystery was not to be found through the evidence of poor Mrs. Morris.

Turnbull soon reached the same conclusion, and as the old lady seemed to suffer at being kept so long from the side of her young and suffering mistress, he gently assisted her upstairs, leaving her at the chamber-door, himself returning to rejoin Captain Drake.

"You say you have wired Mr. Dunn?" the latter asked.

Turnbull nodded assent. He was hardly in the mood for talking, just then, and the captain, seeing as much, relapsed into silence.

Fortunately this was not of long duration, and both men gave an eager start as they caught the sound of footsteps descending the stair.

"I must insist on hearing his report, captain," resolutely muttered Turnbull, his dark eyes glowing vividly.

"You may, of course, if you wish," with a faint smile as the surgeon entered the room. "What is it, Branksome?"

"A puzzle!" was the frowning response. "She's a pretty sick girl, and will be lucky if she pulls through with a sound brain, but what caused it all—whether liquor, drugs or pure excitement—is beyond my power to say, just now!"

Turnbull and Drake interchanged startled glances. This was a totally unexpected fault in the trail, but before they could speak, there came a sharp ring at the front door.

CHAPTER XI.

BEFORE THE CORONER.

ROBERT TURNBULL chanced to be nearest the door, and he answered the call, but as he met Policeman Mallory face to face, he stepped aside to permit him to report to his chief.

His report was brief, but it gave both men grave faces and angry eyes, though, to speak the truth, it was hardly more than they had anticipated from the very first.

Coroner Eppstien, in whose district the murder had been discovered, was pressing matters as rapidly as lay in his power. He had already summoned a jury, and obstinately declared that he would hold a session immediately, let who wished oppose him.

"Kimberley bid me say that the old Dutchman was issuing subpoenas right and left, and," adding in a whisper to his captain, "that he believed he was swearing out a warrant for Miss Mayne herself!"

"If he attempts to serve it—will you permit such an outrage, Captain Drake?" sharply demanded Turnbull, his face white, his eyes glowing with a desperate light.

"I certainly shall not," quickly interposed Branksome. "The girl is under my charge now, and until she takes a turn for the better, no man can remove her from beneath this roof. It would be rank murder!"

Captain Drake nodded his approval.

"You hold her, doctor, and I'll see that my men hold the approaches, even against the doughty Simon."

"Can't we do more than that, captain?" eagerly asked Turnbull, though he gave a decided breath of relief as he found coöperation where he anticipated opposition. "Can't we choke the bull-headed fool off long enough to let Dan Dunn get here? Think of what it will be to him, coming on top of the other blow! If he finds his promised wife is openly accused of committing this crime, it will drive him crazy or turn him into a devil of vengeance on all who had part or lot in the shameful business!"

Captain Drake shook his head doubtfully, though there was a kindlier light in his earnest eyes.

"You know what Eppstien is. You know that he's worse than a fat hog to drive. I might have shut him out, perhaps, first off, and would at any risks if I could have suspected how matters were to turn out. But our opposing him now would only muddle things still worse."

Robert Turnbull grew quiet, but it was a dangerous calmness, and Captain Drake checked him as he was about to leave the house.

"Don't go off at half-cock, Robert! You'll only make matters worse."

"I wired Dan Dunn that I'd see everything was held as found until he could get here, captain," coldly responded the little detective. "I expect him by the train in the morning. I'll keep my pledge, if I have to kill or cripple Simon Eppstien in trying!"

"Small loss to either office or community," grimly chuckled the captain; "but then I'd have to run you in, and that would leave Dan Dunn short the use of his right hand, just when he most feels the need of it—see, Robert?"

Still with arm locked in that of the little detective, Captain Drake hastily bade Surgeon Branksome devote his best attention to Miss Mayne, doing what lay in his power to restore her scattered wits and solve the mystery of her past night. He placed Mallory on guard inside the door, bidding him keep the barrier closed and locked, admitting no one until his return.

"If Eppstien sends any papers to be served here, refuse both them and their bearer admission. If he or they kick up a row, run them in on my authority. I'll see that you have enough help to handle them all as I go out. And now, Robert, shall we go try to put a muzzle on our German donkey?"

Turnbull nodded an eager assent, and something more of hope began to lighten up his honest face.

It would go hard but that, between them, they managed to hold the obstinate coroner in subjection, even if they could not prevent his holding a session.

On this point the two men, now seeming allies, consulted while walking briskly back to the building in which Lapier Tostivan had come by his death.

They found Kimberley still in charge, though looking a little anxious as he caught sight of his superior, but his looks brightened a little as Cap-

tain Drake smiled. After all, he could hardly have done more, for Simon Eppstien had lost no time in getting to work immediately after Major Mayne was taken from the building to his own house.

It was a curious situation, all in all, though not exactly without precedent. The coroner, though hot-tempered and obstinate to a degree whenever he felt himself or his office snubbed, was at bottom a jolly, good-natured son of the Fatherland, and only for his unfortunate belief that both the detectives and the regular police were constantly working against him, no trouble would have been caused by action of his own.

With a little more justice the police and the members of the Detective Agency were also at swords' points, each jealous of the other, each willing to lose a point for their own side if by so doing they could cause the loss of two to the other faction.

From Kimberley they learned that Eppstien had his jury now in the office where Lapier Tostivan met his death, for the purpose of viewing the body and its surroundings.

Drake and Turnbull ascended the flight, to meet the party just emerging from the room. With a hasty whisper to the captain, Turnbull drew aside, to slip into the office the moment they passed out of sight down the steps. A single glance assured him that nothing had been altered by coroner or jury, and he drew a great breath of relief. At least he would keep his pledge to Dan Dunn this far!

He left the room just as Kimberley came up to take charge of the door, and when the little detective passed away, the tall officer was the richer for a handful of golden coin; not given or taken as a bribe, but as a reward for standing firm in the discharge of his duty.

A few minutes later, Robert Turnbull was standing inside the coroner's office, gloomily listening to the preliminary proceedings, which the pompous official seemed to take pleasure in going through, possibly because he fancied that both Captain Drake and the little detective wished him to pass them over briefly as possible.

As he met with no actual opposition, however, the choleric fellow grew milder, more business-like, and soon had the deformed janitor who had been the first to discover the tragedy, on the stand.

After the routine questions and answers concerning his name, age, occupation, etc., Timothy Timberlake proceeded to tell his story, explaining how he came to open the door of the deceased.

It was part of his duty to sweep, air and dust a number of rooms each morning, and this duty he usually performed at a very early hour. There were odd spells when some of his employers, the deceased among them, would pass a night in office. On these occasions, he, the witness, would wait to arrange the rooms after their owners had gone out to breakfast.

On the night last past, Lapier Tostivan had remained at his office much later than usual, but the witness thought nothing strange of this, for he knew that a bed could be formed by pulling out the lower portion of the larger bookcase, and on a number of other occasions the deceased had so used the article of furniture.

He sat up until late; it was past midnight when he went to bed; but he was a light sleeper, and felt confident that he would have heard Mr. Tostivan had he left the building even after sleep came to him. And for that reason he had passed the office of the dead man by, without attempting to enter, believing its owner still asleep.

"What caused you to change your mind, then?"

To this question the witness replied that, after performing his other duties, he went out after his own breakfast. Returning, and hearing no sounds in the room occupied by the deceased, he concluded that the old gentleman must have risen and left the office while he, the witness, was absent at his morning meal. So, as the hour was late, he used his pass-key to open the door, which he found locked, to discover that awful sight.

Under close questioning, "Humpy" Timberlake told what he saw, as clearly as his great fright would permit him to recall; but that portion of his evidence need not be repeated in this connection.

There was an even more profitable field behind, and the coroner was shrewd enough to thoroughly develop it, on a respectful hint from Captain Drake, who had treasured up a stray word or two which the witness let fall concerning his broken rest of the past night.

Yes, he had been called up once just after he crept into bed. It was a lady, who hurriedly asked him if Mr. Lapier Tostivan had an office in that building. She was well dressed, seemingly perfectly respectable, and it was not such an unusual circumstance as to give rise to suspicions on his part. He directed her where to find the office, and as she did not return at once, he supposed she found the gentleman and was, most likely, consulting him on business matters.

He returned to his bed, but did not remove his clothes. Was quite positive he did not fall asleep before the lady returned. Thought she

was up-stairs not to exceed half an hour. Rose, let her out, closed the door and went back to bed, this time to slightly oversleep himself.

The coroner, again prompted gently by a written line from Captain Drake, asked him if he had ever seen the lady before that occasion. If not, did she remind him of anybody?

The little janitor grew perceptibly uneasy, licking his lips and trying to clear his throat before he made answer.

No, he could give no clear description from his first interview, beyond the fact that she was tall and of fine figure; that she was neatly dressed, wearing a dark cloak; without gloves, to the best of his recollection, and with a dark veil drawn over her face. Believed she was young from her movements and her voice, the last being very sweet and musical, as he recalled it while waiting for her return.

"From your first interview, you say, Mr. Timberlake," slowly uttered the coroner, his little eyes shining bright as twin stars, his thick lips protruding, a pudgy hand slowly gesticulating in front of the shrinking witness. "Pray, what am I to understand by that expression?"

The deformed stammered incoherently, mopping his beaded brows with a dingy kerchief as though he could thus regain a portion of his usual clearness of wit. Realizing his predicament, one of the jurymen changed the form of the question:

"Did you recognize the lady on her return, witness?"

With a desperate effort Timberlake rallied enough to proceed:

"Waal, you see, gents an' your Honor, not to say jest that, beca'se it sorter come to me like a flash whilst I was layin' an' fightin' back the sleepy fit, an' a-waitin' fer the lady to be let out, as it might be."

"You mean that you recalled her voice?"

Timberlake nodded slowly.

"That an' her ginerall figger, too, I think it was. I know it made my eyes wide open fu'st off, to think I'd bin sech a dumb fool as not to've hit it off right away. Why, gents, an' your Honor, I've see'd the leddy time an' time ag'in fer the last—"

"Stick to the point, please," curtly interjected the coroner. "You say you recognized the lady after she went up-stairs. Remember you are on your oath, witness, and your statement will stand against you for all time. Now—state to the jury just what you discovered."

"That the young leddy was Miss Mayne, the fat major's daughter!" blurted out Timberlake, shivering and shrinking with bodily fear as a cry of uncontrollable anger burst from the lips of Robert Turnbull.

Captain Drake caught the little detective by an arm and held him powerless for the moment, while Timberlake doggedly added:

"I can't help it, gents, but I jest *did*! An' when I let her out, I called her by name—Miss Zelna Mayne—and she said yes, she hed found the old gentleman in his office."

CHAPTER XII.

DAN DUNN VOWS A VENDETTA.

THOUGH so obstinate and pig-headed whenever he was suspected he was being deprived of his rights and privileges, Simon Eppstien was a good and honest man at heart, and though this testimony matched perfectly with the mute evidence left behind by the murdered man, he tried his utmost to get at the simple facts, closely questioning the janitor, and in the end greatly breaking the force of his testimony.

Timberlake admitted that he might have been wrong about stating that he had recognized the lady before her return. He admitted that she hardly answered him when he spoke to her, though he believed that he had given at least the substance of her words. He was sure he called her Miss Zelna Mayne, but as the lady did not respond to it, he concluded that he might have mistaken her for another. And by close questioning he was finally brought to own that he had never clearly decided his vague suspicions were correct until after seeing her name written in blood on the wall just above the head of the deceased.

Still, when he was permitted to leave the stand, it was plain to all present that the case looked very dark for the daughter of Major Nelson Mayne.

While Turnbull was listening to this evidence, his face pale and hard-set as he saw how surely the chain of circumstances was being wound about the poor girl whom, in his heart of hearts he knew was innocent of this atrocious crime, a messenger brought a dispatch to the office, forwarded by Kimberley. It was a brief line from Dan Dunn, stating that he would reach town by the early morning Express.

The coroner called Captain Drake to the witness-stand, but asked him few questions concerning the finding of the body, being simply enough to corroborate the evidence given by Timberlake. Then he revealed his main object by asking if the witness had taken any measures to prevent the escape of the person accused by the writing on the wall?

Captain Drake briefly detailed his movements, stating that the lady named was now under strict guard at the residence of her father. That

she was dangerously ill, as a reputable physician was ready to testify under oath.

"It would be murder foul as that which your Honor is now engaged in investigating were an attempt made to either arrest or drag her to bear witness before this court, your Honor. I will perform my duty to the best of my ability, and go bail that the lady named shall not escape by flight; but beyond that no living power can make me go."

Robert Turnbull was called, more to show the authority to which he had to bow, despite himself, but he was not detained long. And as he left the stand he gave Drake the dispatch from Dan Dunn, begging him to do all that lay in his power to procure an adjournment, at least until the next day.

He left the room, feeling as though he must have fresh air or suffocate. Never before had he felt so completely broken-down.

What did it all mean?

Whose pitiless hand was dealing all these bitter blows at the heart of Dan Dunn?

"She never dealt that blow—she *couldn't*!" he muttered, leaning against an alley wall, baring his fevered brow to the breeze. "Timberlake was swearing to a foul lie, or else some one stole her voice to the more surely blind the crippled idiot! But who—whose Satanic cunning has spun this cruel web? Who—"

He gave a cry as he started from the wall, his face flushing hotly and his eyes seeming literally on fire. Who could it be but Harlequin Hat!

Like an inspiration it came to him, and then the devilish plot seemed laid bare to his inspection. He never once doubted the truth of this revelation, and only gave time and energy to obtaining the necessary proofs, if possible, before Dan Dunn should reach town.

Even when he failed to find a single recent trace of the ex-actress in town, though he set every agency at his command to busy work, he refused to believe that he could possibly be in error. No other enemy of Dan Dunn's was cunning and bold and pitiless enough to strike two such blows, to wound the heart before slaying the man.

Several times Turnbull called at the Mayne residence to learn how Zelna was progressing, each visit bringing a more favorable report. She had yielded to the medicine administered by Surgeon Branksome. She was resting quietly. The doctor reported that there was rather more than an even chance for her to waken in full possession of her reasoning faculties.

He met Captain Drake and learned with grim satisfaction that the coroner, having shown his authority, consented to an adjournment over night. He told the captain of his new-born suspicions, and gained his pledge to do all that lay in his power to bring the truth to light.

In this manner the faithful watch-dog spent that long, weary night, the first gray of dawn finding him pacing the depot platform as tireless as ever, waiting for the arrival of his loved master.

The train was on time, as he had ascertained long since, and he knew that Dan Dunn was aboard; the office from whence his telegram had been sent proved so much.

Dan Dunn sprung from the still moving cars, and Robert Turnbull was at his side instantly. Not a word was spoken. Their eyes met, and Dan Dunn knew that there was naught to hope, by the expression he saw in those dark orbs.

In silence Turnbull led the way to a closed carriage which awaited them, bidding the man drive at once to the office building. And not until the wheels began to rattle over the paving did Dan Dunn speak:

"You have held all waiting for me, Robert?"

"As near as I could, sir."

"Tell me briefly just how it all happened, please."

It was no easy task thus given him, for Turnbull was cut to the very heart by that cold, mechanical tone. It told him how intensely the man whom he loved was suffering beneath that stony mask. And to think of those cruel words written above the dead father's head!

Still, he managed to obey, simply detailing how the deformed janitor discovered the corpse, already cold and stiffened. He kept back the terrible accusation on the wall until the very last. He would have suppressed it altogether had he not feared the result in case Dan Dunn should come upon it without some warning.

Tremblingly he told of the bloody scrawl, but the manner in which it was received fairly amazed him. Dan Dunn uttered a hoarse cry, but it seemed purely one of vengeance, not of horror at having his promised bride thus charged with a hideous deed.

After that one cry, Dan Dunn maintained perfect silence. Through the growing light of a new day Robert Turnbull could see how ghastly white his face was, how luridly blazed his eyes. Apart from that, it might have been the marble mask of a statue without life.

There was a policeman on duty before the building, but no gathering as on the day before. He silently touched his helmet to the men, but made no attempt toward checking their entrance.

The door of steel was unfastened and slid into its recess by the man who had temporarily

taken the place of the janitor, as he recognized the signal of Robert Turnbull. And then the two men silently went up the steps, pausing a moment before the guarded door, beyond which still lay the mortal remains of Lapier Tostivan.

Officer Mallory was on guard duty here, and like his mates below he made no effort to exclude them from the death-chamber.

Robert Turnbull, a choking lump filling his throat, unlocked the door and set it ajar, silently stepping aside to permit his master to enter alone. Dan Dunn, with a ghostly smile, bade him follow by a quick glance, himself crossing the threshold without an outward trace of emotion.

Softly closing the door behind them, the son stood motionless, gazing steadily upon the corpse of his father.

Robert Turnbull turned his own face to the wall, unable to keep back the hot tears of speechless pity and sympathy which, in that awful moment, he dared not offer his loved master.

Dan Dunn seemed to scan every article, everything in the room, before moving again. He looked longest at the figure of his murdered parent, but his eyes lingered for a full minute upon that hideous red scrawl marked above the snow-crowned head.

In perfect silence he crossed the room and sunk on his knees by the side of the corpse. Softly his hand brushed the silken hair from the high, broad brow, then bent until his colorless lips touched that terribly cold skin.

He softly touched the extended right hand, lifting it until he could note the dried blood surrounding its tip, that being clean as if wiped dry by the act of writing those ominous words on the wall.

Then, with hands clasped until his sinewy fingers seemed to melt into each other, he lifted his face, his eyes glowing with a fierce, deadly light, he slowly uttered:

"Father, listen to your son, and record his vow. I will avenge your cruel assassination. I will never give over until I have brought to punishment one and all who have had part or parcel in this fiendish act. If I fail through fault of my own, may I never more hope to meet you or mother after death comes to me also. Amen!"

He rose to his feet and passed over to the larger bookcase, turning a key and opening down and pulling out a narrow couch. He smoothed the bedclothes, then passed back and without a seeming effort lifted the body of his dead in his arms, placing it upon the couch. He drew the snowy sheet over figure and face, then turned for the first time toward Robert Turnbull.

At his soft touch, the wiry little fellow turned from the wall, desperately striving to wink away the hot tears which marked his haggard face. Dan Dunn smiled faintly as he saw this evidence of grieving sympathy, and bent his head to softly touch his lips to the damp face.

"I love and honor you for them, Robert," he said, his voice low and musical, but otherwise strangely steady for a son who had just performed such a sad duty. "But now try to brace up. There's work ahead for both you and I, Robert. We're man-hunters once more, but not for gold or fame this time!"

It was no easy task to enforce composure, with that lip-touch still tingling on his cheek, but never yet had Robert Turnbull refused to obey an order from those lips, and he could not begin now.

"Tell me more fully what has happened, Robert," added Dan Dunn, placing a chair for his friend and taking one himself, facing that red charge on the wall as though he wished to grow even more familiar with it. "You said something about an inquest?"

In as steady a voice as he could command at such short notice, Turnbull complied, detailing how it chanced that Simon Eppstien got the upper hand of them, and then briefly running over the evidence given by Humpy Timberlake. He made no effort to soften this, sticking to the plain facts, for there was no time to waste in idle fencing. Every minute spent was so much grace afforded the actual criminals.

Dan Dunn made no comment, though his eyes glittered vividly. His gaze was for the most part fixed on those letters of blood.

He asked about Zelna Mayne, and his voice was as even and firm as before, showing not a trace of the powerful emotions which must be boiling and seething under that icy crust.

Again Robert Turnbull complied, concealing nothing, telling the simple facts so far as gleaned. His last report from the sick-chamber was that Dr. Branksome believed his patient would waken to full reason before that day was half spent. She might have a spell of illness, but she would no longer be in danger of losing her reason.

"Unless that obstinate pig-head contrives to drag her down to bear witness before his jury!" flashed Turnbull, hotly. "And I'll kill him myself before he can charge her with this foul murder!"

"Ay! it is a foul murder!" echoed Dan Dunn, his eyes aglow. "But Zelna never committed it—father never wrote those words!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SOFT-HAND DETECTIVE BEGINS WORK.

DESPITE his firm conviction all along that Zelna Mayne could not possibly have committed this awful deed, Robert Turnbull gave a deep breath of relief as he listened to Dan Dunn. And after that he would have been easier to convince that his own hand had let out that aged life, in a fit of sleep-walking, than that the promised bride of his friend and master was guilty.

"I knew it," he simply responded, with a quaint scorn underlying the additional words; "But those chuckle-heads couldn't get it through 'em. All they could see or think of was that—those words written on the wall, yonder."

"A lie, scarcely less foul than the murder by which they obtained the blood to shape that charge!" flashed Dan Dunn, though only the rapidity of his speech betrayed how intensely he was feeling; his face was cold and immobile, his tones even and unemphasized.

"I said that, too, but what was the use? Even Captain Drake seemed to think I was 'way off my base, and almost laughed as he asked me how I expected to prove it. I couldn't, but you—you can, sir?"

Dan Dunn turned toward the speaker, seemingly aroused by the tremor which ran through that hesitating question. Their eyes met, and a faint smile seemed to enter his steely orbs as he replied:

"Yes, I can prove it, Robert. Father never wrote those words, though the assassin may have used his lifeless finger for that purpose."

The little detective listened eagerly, his dark eyes filled with an ardent light. He caught his breath sharply as Dan Dunn ceased speaking, and he looked as though he longed to hear more, burned to ask how the Soft-Hand Detective knew that Lapier Tostivan had never written those ghastly letters on the wall, how he expected to prove this to men who only looked at the surface of things.

If Dan Dunn suspected aught of this burning curiosity on the part of his right-hand man, he gave no sign. In all probability he never realized how intensely Turnbull was feeling the matter. He had declared his firm belief in the innocence of Zelna Mayne, and that was enough.

Dan Dunn took a sheet of note-paper from the desk-drawer, writing a few lines upon it, then passing the paper over to Turnbull as he said:

"There is so much to do before we can get fairly started on the hunt, Robert, that I'll have to keep you going for a little, though I can see how badly you need rest and quiet. Will you look after this part for me, old friend?"

Mechanically Turnbull glanced at the written lines. There was the address of an undertaker, and beneath it the business-rooms of a man at the head of the cemetery association.

"You can select a suitable plot, Robert, and I'd rather trust your judgment than my own, just now. You are limited only so far: the undertaker must wait for positive orders until after I have seen Coroner Eppstien. You understand?"

Turnbull bowed assent, but there was something in his dark eyes that drew a kindly, loving hand to his arm, and brought forth the words:

"You will have time for this, and yet be at the front when I show these slow-wits how great a mistake they have fallen into."

"You can—you can prove it, even to the Dutchman?"

"Even to Pig Simon, Robert," quietly responded the detective.

That was enough, and the little watch-dog at once hurried from the chamber of death, eager to perform his commissions and return in time to hear proven what he had all along stubbornly maintained: that those letters of blood charging Zelna Mayne with murder most foul, were all a cunning, devilish fraud!

Dan Dunn paused long enough to take one more look at the face of his dead, his own scarcely less corpse-like in its pallor. Then, gently replacing the white covering, he turned and left the room.

He paused outside to speak briefly to the policeman on guard, bidding him refuse admittance to all others than himself, Robert Turnbull or Captain Drake. He asked his name and number, noting them down as he added:

"You are on duty now, friend, and I can't talk to you as I would like. When this black affair is put in order, I'll make it a point to see you again."

Without pausing for a reply, the Soft-Hand Detective passed on, leaving the guarded building and stepping briskly down the street in the direction of the station presided over by Captain Drake. But he was not more than half-way there before he came face to face with the officer himself.

In silence their hands closed upon each other, their eyes meeting fully, saying more than their lips.

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Dunn, though I could wish it was on a brighter occasion. You have been to the office?"

Dan Dunn bowed assent. He was trying to judge just how far he might rely on the friendly aid of this man, with whom he had, to a certain degree, been on terms of rivalry ever since joining the detective agency.

Captain Drake smiled grimly as he divined what was locking the tongue of the detective, and passing a hand through Dunn's arm, walking easily by his side in the direction of his own office, he added:

"We've both of us rather let our professional pride get away with our better judgment, Mr. Dunn, but I'm ready to turn over a new leaf if you'll help me. Above all else, I'm anxious to get at the very bottom of this affair, let the ax fall where it may!"

"Never on the neck you fancied it ought, captain," quickly uttered the Soft-Hand Detective, his eyes flashing and a fleeting smile marking his lips under the swift, eager glance of the other.

"You've hit a clew that escaped us, then, Dunn?"

"If so, you have no cause to heap blame upon your own head, captain, since it escaped even Robert Turnbull, though he instinctively jumped at the truth and clung to it like a bulldog—Heaven bless him for it, too!"

Captain Drake looked as though he would dearly like to ask for more light on the subject, but as Dan Dunn ceased speaking, he hardly liked to show his curiosity more clearly. After a brief silence, he asked:

"Shall we go to my private office, or direct to the station?"

"To your office, if it is not too far away, captain. I want to say a few words to you which I'd rather not utter where other ears might chance to pick them up prematurely."

Captain Drake at once halted a passing hack, and five minutes later the two men were entering his snug little office. Once together with closed doors, Dan Dunn lost little time in preliminaries.

"Turnbull told me how considerably you acted in this case, captain, and this knowledge gives me cheek enough to impose upon you to a still greater degree. May I go on?"

"Why not? I know you'll never ask aught of me inconsistent with my duty as an officer of the law."

"Hardly that cheeky, captain," with a faint smile. "As I told you a bit ago, I'm grateful for what you have already done by way of protecting the innocent from further insult. I want you to go still further in that direction if you will."

"By which I am to understand?"

"That the name of the lady written on the wall above my poor father's head was traced, not by him in his dying moments, but by the one who murdered him!" flashed the detective, for the first time giving outward signs of the seething passions hidden under his stoical mask. "That father never met his death by her hand. I can prove beyond a reasonable doubt, and will do so if you can induce Simon Eppstien to consent to holding a secret session to-day."

"I'll do my best in that direction, and never another man in town will be happier to bear the young lady fully exculpated. I had to doubt her, on the seeming evidence, but I began to doubt my own eyes the moment I saw her face."

He cut himself short, flushing a bit as those steel-gray eyes rested upon his animated face. He, a gray-beard, married, the father of a large family, going into rhapsodies over another sweetheart!

But Dan Dunn was not offended at this honest outburst, abbreviated though it was. He leaned across the desk and gripped the captain's hand ardently. From that hour on there would be no more jealous rivalry between the twain.

"I thank you for that, and the time shall come when my wife will add her thanks to mine, captain," he earnestly declared. "But let that go for the present. Will you trust me? Will you agree to use your influence with Eppstien? Or, if you prefer me to speak out more plainly, I can do so."

"Keep your secret, Dunn," smiled the officer. "Only—may I ask if your suspicions point positively in any one quarter?"

"Yes," was the instant response. "I believe this double blow is meant to be the first installment of revenge against me, in person, for the part I played in breaking up a section of the old Night Hawks. I believe that Harlequin Hat is at the bottom of it all, for only a woman of her caliber could have devised such a fiendish plot! Only a woman could have dragged another, purely innocent, into the toils after this satanic fashion!"

"Turnbull thought much the same, but we couldn't find any trace of Hattie in town," slowly commented the captain.

"Of course not!" with his lip curling sharply in scorn at having permitted himself to be so thoroughly deceived by the cunning actress only a few hours before. "She stocked her hand carefully, but all the same I'll spoil the combination in the end."

He briefly told of his double meeting with Mrs. Haylock the day before, and startled Drake by telling him of the escape or death of Craig

Dairmid. He declared that he believed this escape—for now he felt almost certain the convict had not been slain—was part of the complicated schemes to avenge upon him the death of Horace Haylock, though he could give no positive grounds for his belief as yet.

Promising to say more after the day was older, he took his departure, asking Drake to send word to the Mayne residence in case he gained the corener's consent to hold a session with closed doors.

The captain bore him company as far as the street, giving him a card with a penciled word to the officer in charge of the guard over the residence, then bidding him good luck on his mission.

Dan Dunn quickly covered the distance between the office and the home of his pledged bride, finding no difficulty in securing admission after showing the captain's card to the man on duty.

He was met at the parlor-door by Major Mayne, haggard, looking years older than when they last met, but with a remnant of his haughty pomposity as he waved aside the hand extended toward him.

"Never, sir, until you can blot out the hideous lie the hand of your father—"

"That hand was dead when the base slander was shaped, Major Mayne," quickly interjected the detective, his lips quivering with the strong emotion he fought hard to hold in subjection. "I swear this—I will prove it even to your complete satisfaction before the sun goes down this day!"

The old man staggered back, flushing painfully, one hand rising to his throat, as though he was on the point of suffocation. Dan Dunn caught him in his arms, gently placing him in an easy-chair, divining the truth. Even while stoutly, loyally affirming the complete innocence of his idolized child, the poor man had been haunted by hideous doubts. How could he help it, after what had happened? How could his trust be complete while the strange absence and stranger return of his daughter remained unexplained?

Gradually Dan Dunn soothed and calmed the veteran, making him understand that he could and would prove beyond all doubt that his dead father never wrote that hideous accusation in blood, but without fully explaining just how he was to bring this about. And then, as Major Mayne grew more himself, the lover came to the surface, and he asked:

"Zelna—can I see her, now?"

CHAPTER XIV.

A STRANGE STORY.

THE answer came speedily, but not from the lips of Major Mayne.

Rapid footsteps echoed on the carpeted steps, and a moment later the door was flung open by Betsy Morris, the housekeeper, her hands flying up and her eyes protruding ludicrously as she caught sight of the Soft-Hand Detective.

"Well, now, if it don't beat the land!" she spluttered, one hand dropping down to press tightly against her side to control a "stitch."

"What is it, Mrs. Morris?" hastily asked Dunn, striding forward, his face working, his tones full of anxiety. "Your mistress—not worse?"

"She said you was here—she jest riz up in bed an' cried out that you was come an' she wanted to see you an'—"

"Can I go right up now?"

"Deed you can't, sir!" and Mrs. Morris crossed the passage with her arms as though such a frail barrier could bar his way against his will. "Not now—not if the king was to—"

"Go back and tell Zelna I am here, waiting impatiently for an interview with her, please," said Dunn, controlling his emotions by an effort of will. "Be as speedy as you can, for time is very precious!"

He gently forced the agitated and bewildered woman to the foot of the stairs, starting her up them, then returning to the parlor where Major Mayne was waiting in dazed helplessness.

"It's incredible—she's lain speechless ever since—and now to say she knew you were here and—*you*, not *me*, she asked for!"

All haughtiness, all pomposity was gone now, and covering his face with his shivering hands, the sorely-shaken veteran burst into tears.

Dan Dunn made no effort to calm him, in words. He softly rested a hand on that bowed head, knowing that this outburst would result in more good than evil.

He could understand how terribly this proud man must have suffered during the past four-and-twenty hours. He knew how completely his life was bound up in his only surviving child. He knew that it would kill him unless his daughter could be set clear and free from all stain before the eyes of the whole world, as well as in the sight of her more immediate circle.

Far sooner than he dared hope, Mrs. Morris returned to announce Zelna's permission for her lover to ascend to her chamber.

"To think of it, sirs!" the worthy woman gasped in dull amazement. "She was up an' part dressed when I got back! An' she only the minnit afore fit to perish to death an'—merciful Father over us all!"

Dan Dunn was thoughtful enough for others to check his mad impulse to leap up the stairs to meet his loved one in the shortest space possible. He took Major Mayne by the arm and assisted him up-stairs, letting him be first to enter the chamber, falling behind to close the door in the face of the panting housekeeper.

As he turned from this necessary precaution, Dan Dunn saw his betrothed wife clasped in the arms of her father. But her beautiful face was visible above one of those broad shoulders, and a little hand came flutteringly out to seek his warm grasp.

"I knew you were here, dearest," she murmured, a rare smile lighting up her face and in part relieving its unusual pallor. "It woke me up as from a dream, and I frightened poor Mrs. Morris half out of her senses by urging her to go summon you to my side!"

"And you are well—you are strong enough to bear this interview, pet?" anxiously asked her father, drawing back enough to view her countenance, showing so plainly the effects of what she had so recently undergone.

"It will help me—it will strengthen me, papa," was the half-laughing, half-tearful response. "There is so much—I have had such frightful dreams that—"

She paused, drawing back and glancing with a frightened air from face to face as she clasped one hand to her forehead.

Dan Dunn caught her hands in his, holding them firmly, encouragingly, as he softly uttered:

"You can trust me, Zelna? You know I would not do or say aught to harm you, my darling?"

The maiden bent her head until her lips touched his forehead as he knelt beside her chair. No answer in words could have said more.

"Tell me of your dreams, darling," he added, lending her strength by his tender yet manful eyes. "Tell me everything you can possibly remember after you parted with your father last night."

"Will—can she bear it?" trembled the major, uneasily.

"What has happened? Why do you look and speak so strangely, papa?"

"Are you afraid to trust me, little woman?" gravely yet sweetly asked the Soft-Hand Detective, throwing still more magnetism into his eyes, pressing those little hands still more closely within his own. "Will you not believe me when I say that I will tell you everything at the earliest possible moment?"

Those frightened eyes closed and her head drooped upon his shoulder. Major Mayne gave a groan of grief as he fancied she had fainted from over-excitement, but Zelna reassured him by a faint smile and a fleeting glance.

"I am only tired, dear papa," she murmured, slowly. "It is so good—it rests me so much—dear David!"

Again her eyes closed, and without changing his position in the slightest, Dan Dunn directed the major toward the little stand on which rested several bottles.

Fortunately the major retained sufficient wit to remember the parting orders of Dr. Branksome, and measured out the potion which was to be given as soon as the patient should awaken. Dan Dunn administered this, and its effect was almost immediate.

"I feel better now," smiled the maiden, faintly, but making no effort to lift her head from that loved pillow. "I was so sleepy!"

"And you are able to do as I beg, dear girl?" softly murmured the lover-detective. "You can tell me how far back your memory reaches?"

It was hard to urge his request, but time was very precious. Even in a moment like this he could not forget the vow he had taken. And that foul charge still hung over the head of the one being on earth whom he had to love.

His strange persistence once more fluttered the sadly-shaken nerves of the girl, but in the end he calmed her sufficiently for his purpose. And seated by her side, with both her hands clasped in his, Dan Dunn directed her clouded brain back to the night on which Lapier Tostivan came by his death.

"I remember—I can recall a promise to papa not to sit up for his return," slowly, painfully murmured the maiden, knitting her dainty brows with the effort to clear away that strange, puzzling mist which seemed drawn over her brain. "I think—yes!" with a gleam of energy that caused the heart of the detective to give a swift bound. "I was sitting in the parlor, reading. Mrs. Morris had gone to bed, with one of her headaches. I told her I would not sit up much longer, and that she might retire at once. Then—"

"What next, little one?" gently murmured the detective, as she stopped short, that puzzled look again creeping into her face and eyes.

"I think—some one came into the parlor. I do not remember answering a ring, or opening

the door, but of course I must have done so. There was no one else, you know, and—"

"Never mind that part, pet; this person—was it a lady?"

"How could you know that?" in surprise, but adding: "Yes, it was a lady, or a woman. I remember now that she seemed awkward, or frightened, or something like that. It was a woman, but her face was covered with a black veil. I know that. I know—her eyes were so bright!" with a little shiver, instinctively moving closer to the side of her lover.

"She spoke to you, of course?"

"Did she?" with that perplexed look growing more pronounced. "Of course she must, but—it is so strange!" her lips quivering like those of a frightened child. "Those eyes—I can see them now, like balls of fire behind that black veil—I can't remember anything beyond that!" her head drooping and tears filling her eyes.

Smothering his disappointment as best he could, Dan Dunn soothed the poor girl, gradually winning back her composure, then adroitly trying to give her the lost clew; but his cunning efforts were all spent in vain. Beyond those strangely-brilliant orbs the maiden could not go.

She could not even describe the figure of her strange visitor, beyond a belief that she was tall and gracefully built, as far as could be told through the loose cloak which she wore.

With her brain in such a troubled state it was a delicate matter for the detective, with all his cleverness, to try to gain any further information. He dared not risk too much while she was so weak and shaken in her nerves, but he went far enough to assure himself that, for the present at least, Zelna had not the slightest suspicion that she had ever left the house, much less spent the entire night abroad.

Just as he reached this conclusion, and reluctantly resolved to abandon his efforts to solve the strange mystery from that starting-point for the present, Mrs. Morris tapped at the door and announced the arrival of Dr. Branksome. Dan Dunn himself admitted the police surgeon, and silently watched his movements, trying to read his face before his tongue should be set at liberty.

He drew a freer breath as he fancied the doctor was pleased with the improvement in his patient, and made no objections when Branksome firmly declared that Zelna must have more perfect repose.

"Above all, you must not hold a levee, my dear child," he added, with a bland, fatherly smile which sat well upon his grave face. "You are doing charmingly now, and I'll not permit my new laurels to wither through a young lady's love of gossip!"

He called in Mrs. Morris, drawing her to the little stand on which his medicine was placed, carefully instructing her in her duties to their fair patient, sedulously keeping his broad back turned toward the lovers the while.

Dan Dunn understood him, and made the most of the few moments of grace, knowing that he was to be banished from the sick chamber. He told Zelna to yield implicitly to her physician, and not try to recall his questions. She would be all right when she had secured a little natural sleep, and then he would see her again.

A keen glance warned him that his grace was expended, and Dan Dunn pressed a warm kiss on the lips of his promised wife, then obediently followed the surgeon and the major out of the room.

Not until the parlor was gained did Surgeon Branksome utter a word, but when he spoke it was with almost harsh decision:

"I must positively forbid your visiting my patient, Mr. Dunn, unless you pledge your word of honor not to press her with questions concerning the past, before I give you full leave."

"I felt sure I was not harming her, doctor."

"I don't say you was, but it is a mercy that you did not," a little less sharply. "Her constitution is stronger than I thought, or you would have thrown her back—I would have found a maniac on my hands, sir! Will you pass your word as I demand?"

"I must," with an unconcealed sigh, his brows clouding. "Not even to solve this black mystery would I endanger her life or reason. She is my promised wife, doctor!"

"I know that. Only for that, and only for the terrible loss you have suffered, I should be still harsher with you for your imprudent conduct. I don't mean to be too hard on you, Mr. Dunn. I only warn you that Miss Mayne has suffered terribly. Her brain is clouded now, but if she is kept quiet, if she is not unduly excited, I think I can promise a complete and speedy recovery. But, on the other hand, if I am unable to command this perfect quiet, I must throw up the case at once. I cannot stand by and see one of my patients driven to insanity, sir!"

"I'll keep him out, sir, if I have to kill him!" flashed the major.

"I hardly think you need resort to such heroic measures, major," with a grim smile. "Mr. Dunn's promise is quite sufficient."

Just then a rap sounded at the hall door.

CHAPTER XV.

THE FATAL MISTAKE.

DAN DUNN answered the call, to find at the door a messenger from Captain Drake, bearing a sealed message. Quickly tearing this open, he drew a breath of relief as his eyes drank in the contents.

All was going well, and Simon Eppstien had consented to hold a secret session without delay. All would be in readiness by the time the Soft-Hand Detective could reach the place named.

Giving the messenger a liberal reward, Dan Dunn turned back to the parlor and silently showed the hasty note to the major. With trembling eagerness and doubt fighting for the mastery, the sorely-shaken father gazed into that pale, handsome face, trying to read more than those lips would tell him.

"I can, and I will, major," the detective replied to that silent query. "Are you strong enough to bear me company? If so, I would like you to hear what I have to say. I would like you to see how simply I can clear the dead from the foul injustice of which you have up to this moment firmly believed him guilty!"

There was a touch of fire in the last words, and the major, far from being his old self after what he had been called upon to go through, shrunk visibly from the avenging son. Dan Dunn saw this, and instantly his manner softened. After all, could he blame a father for defending his child?

"You will go with me, Major Mayne?" he added, forcing a smile to his lips. "I beg you will do so. Not altogether for my sake, nor for yours, nor yet for Zelna's; for all combined, rather. You will go?"

"I don't like to leave my poor girl while—"

"Miss Mayne will be all the better for that, sir," bluntly interjected the doctor. "I was about to forbid your going near her door until after she has secured a sufficient amount of healthy sleep. If you leave the house, even for a few minutes, it will lessen the temptation to fly in the face of my orders just that much."

Dan Dunn went to the door to send one of the men on guard for a hack, when he caught sight of a wiry little figure across the way and instantly recognized Robert Turnbull. A sign brought the faithful watch-dog to the steps, and a word sent him off swiftly after the desired vehicle, Dan Dunn smiling wistfully after him, knowing well why the honest fellow was lingering near the Mayne residence.

"He wants to hear how I can keep my pledge," he murmured as he closed the door to see that the major was preparing for the short ride to the coroner's office. "He wouldn't bother me with questions, though I could see how intensely interested he was in getting at the truth!"

Five minutes later Dan Dunn helped Major Mayne into the carriage, joining him, while Robert Turnbull occupied the box with the driver. A brief space sufficed to land them in front of the little office, where they were met by Captain Drake in person.

"Couldn't be better, dear boy," he muttered exultantly as the detective returned his grip, with a glance of inquiry. "Actually caught Simon in a good humor—bless the fat frow for it, say I!"

The driver was directed to pass on to the corner, there to wait until his services were again required. Dan Dunn took the arm of the unsteady major in his, bidding Robert Turnbull follow by a kindly look, then entered the little office where the coroner and his jury were awaiting their arrival.

Only pausing to secure the major a seat, Dan Dunn crossed over to face Simon Eppstien, gripping his hand and earnestly thanking him for so promptly acceding to his wishes. Nor did he lose sight by so acting, for it served to fill out the unusual good-humor of the fat man.

"It may be a little irregular, what I am about to ask, your Honor and gentlemen," began the Soft-Hand Detective, glancing quickly, keenly into the faces of the jury. "But above all else I want, and doubtless each and every one of you will declare as much, to see the guilty punished and the innocent cleared from even the lightest stain of suspicion."

"I believe every step we have taken has been toward that same end, Mr. Dunn," quickly interposed the coroner.

"I am sure of that, sir, but the preliminary point I wish to make is this: if we can get at the full light of truth while still keeping the guilty ones partially in the dark, will not our chances of success be so much the greater? If we can make them believe we are all at sea, or blindly nosing about the wrong scent, won't it be easier to trap them than if we put them on the alert?"

"By which I am to understand?"

"My reasons for asking you to hold a secret session, gentlemen," was the prompt response. "I think I can prove to your complete satisfaction that a foul wrong has been done a wholly innocent person in this sad affair, and I will do so after I gain your pledge, singly and unitedly, to keep all that may transpire during this session sacredly a secret until full permission be given you to make known the whole truth. Am I asking too much, gentlemen?"

There was no immediate reply. Simon Eppstien began to pout his thick under lip and wrinkle the heavy brows above his piggy eyes. Captain Drake cleared his throat nervously, fearing the worst, but Dan Dunn would not respond to the effort to catch his eye.

"Because, gentlemen, and you, your Honor," he gravely added, "unless you can give me this assurance without reserve, I must positively decline to make my evidence known even now."

"Because so doing would give the actual criminals warning to run away, you mean?" desperately ventured Captain Drake, risking the anger of the coroner rather than let a chance slip by unimproved.

"For that precise reason," was the instant response. "I have sworn to bring them to justice, and I will not lose a chance through a slavish adherence to empty forms, legal though they may be called. I will even permit the innocent to remain under a cloud for the time being, if necessary, rather than have what I stand ready to prove leak out to reach the ears of the guilty ones."

Major Mayne rose unsteadily to his feet, his face pale and quivering with strong emotion, all the more pitiful from his vain effort at regaining his old proud composure. He strove to speak quietly, but his emotions conquered, and the words came out in a flood:

"Clear her good name—prove that charge a foul calumny as you declared you would and could, Mr. Dunn! Do not leave my poor little girl to die of shame and grief at learning how cruelly she has been maligned! She is so ill—so weak and broken, and— Spare her and do not add murder to my heavy burden! Do not sacrifice my child to a mere quibble, I beg of you, gentlemen!"

His voice failed him. He sunk back, guided to his chair by ever ready Robert Turnbull, a sad picture of broken dignity.

"Am I to speak, your Honor, or am I to remain silent?" steadily uttered the Soft-Hand Detective, his tones even and cold, though the fire in his eyes told that he was strongly moved under that icy mask. "I can put that poor gentleman at rest in his mind, if you will give me leave, but highly as I respect and esteem him, dearly as I love his child, now lying on a bed of sickness, I hold my vow of vengeance still more sacred. I will keep my secret fast locked in my own bosom unless you pledge me your honor, one and all of you, to hold secret all I may tell you this day. Your decision, gentlemen?"

What would have been a simple matter for most persons, proved a difficult task for Simon Eppstien, thanks to his peculiar disposition; but despite his natural obstinacy, he was strongly impressed by the manner, even more than by the words, of the Soft-Hand Detective, and after a short hesitation he yielded.

"You shall have your wish, Mr. Dunn. After all, it is the truth we are seeking, and if a few forms are violated— Well, it shall be so!"

Captain Drake turned quickly to cover the broad smile which came into his face at this unexpected surrender just when he felt most sure all was lost by the stubborn detective.

"I thank you, sir," gravely bowed Dan Dunn. "And you, gentlemen?"

Without hesitation the jurymen pledged themselves to keep secret all that might transpire, then eagerly awaited the promised revelation.

But there was still a certain delay before their curiosity could be gratified. Dan Dunn smiled faintly as he saw the coroner reach for the book on which to swear him before taking his evidence, and slightly shook his head as he uttered:

"A few moments grace, your Honor. I will not detain you very long, but I believe you will in the end admit that I am pursuing the wisest course. Before I make a statement, I beg the privilege of putting a few questions to the gentlemen of the jury, or to yourself, just as you see best."

Again was the worthy Simon sorely puzzled, and seeing this, Dan Dunn quietly explained further:

"What I wish, your Honor, is to have it fully understood just how the deceased was lying. You will quickly realize the importance of this when I give my testimony."

"If his Honor will call me to the stand, perhaps my evidence may throw sufficient light on that point, as I was one of the first to enter the room where the deceased was found," meekly ventured Captain Drake.

By this time the coroner was willing to accept almost any method of getting out of the labyrinth, and he promptly admitted the captain to the stand, leaning back with a vast sigh of relief as he signed Dan Dunn to put his questions as he saw fit.

"You say that you were one of the first to enter the room where my father lay dead, Captain Drake," steadily began the Soft-Hand Detective. "Will you describe as clearly as possible just how the body was lying when you entered the room?"

The witness promptly complied, tersely but clearly painting the picture just as it has been

given to the reader. And when Dan Dunn turned to the coroner and the jury for confirmation, one and all bowed their approval.

"Did you notice the position of each arm and hand, captain?"

"I did. The right arm was partly extended, its hand touching the washboard just below the red writing on the wall. All but the forefinger were partially closed. That finger was stained with blood, dry when I examined it. The finger-tip was clean, as if the blood had been wiped from it while the blood was still fresh."

"And the left arm and hand?"

"Were doubled up under the deceased, as he lay partially on his left side, partly on his stomach. I should say that he had been supporting his body on that arm before his strength failed him."

"Could the deceased have reached the wall as high as those letters without thus supporting himself?"

"He could not, unless he altered his position after so doing."

"Did you examine his left hand to make sure the words were not written with it?"

"I did, with the coroner's permission. I found no trace of blood on that hand. The fingers were perfectly clean and free from stain. After this examination, the body was restored to its original position, every possible care being taken to leave everything as found."

"That will do, captain," bowed Dunn, turning to the jury. "Do you admit that this testimony fully agrees with what you yourselves saw, gentlemen?"

There was a prompt response in the affirmative, and Coroner Eppstien frankly admitted the same when questioned a moment later.

All was silence, all intense eagerness, all burning curiosity, as they waited for the Soft-Hand Detective, who drew his athletic form erect, his eyes glowing, a shadowy smile flitting across his pale, handsome face, as he took the book and waited to be formally sworn.

This was quickly done, and then, without waiting to be questioned, the detective spoke clearly, distinctly, positively:

"I can now make oath before man and heaven that the hand of my murdered father never wittingly shaped that foul accusation! Cunningly as his assassins worked, they made a fatal mistake!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A SEALED VERDICT.

THE jurymen interchanged blank, puzzled glances at this, and Simon Eppstien protruded his thick under-lip with a scowl upon his face. Was this all? Was this worth so much time and trouble in getting at?

A simple assertion that the guilty ones had made a mistake!

Dan Dunn smiled grimly as he noted all this with a single sweep of his keen eyes, and then he steadily added:

"I say the criminals, despite all their devilish cunning, committed a fatal error when they made use of my father's dead right hand to paint their atrocious accusation upon the wall. Because—Lapier Tostivan never was able to write with that right hand in life!"

Even now the men composing the jury seemed perplexed rather than convinced, but this fact did not disconcert the witness in the least.

"What I am saying now, remember, gentlemen, is under oath," he steadily resumed, uttering each word with almost painful distinctness. "My father, the deceased, was what is called 'left-handed' to an unusual degree of completeness. He was annoyed if any one noticed this peculiarity, and concealed it as much as possible. I state under oath that he could not write with his right hand, without turning his letters and words backwards: that is, directly the reverse of the usual manner, or as a line of writing would look if held up before a mirror and the reflection taken as the original."

"You can support this evidence by other witnesses, of course?"

"By at least half a score," was the prompt response. "I will give you a list of at least four reputable men of business now living in this city. I can bring you at least one gentleman who will make oath that he often witnessed the efforts of my father to learn to write after the ordinary fashion with his right hand, four years ago, when an accident temporarily disabled his left hand and arm. I can bring a reputable surgeon with whom my father consulted on the possibility of conquering this peculiar defect in his muscles by any sort of an operation. This surgeon will doubtless be willing to make oath to this consultation in the interests of justice if you think it necessary he should do so. And I affirm he will tell you, as he told my father and myself at the time, that such a cure was wholly beyond his art."

Dan Dunn ceased speaking, his attitude that of one who had told all he knew or cared to tell, but waiting patiently for such questions as might be put him by the coroner or the men on the jury.

A few such were asked, and as promptly answered, but nothing of special importance was elicited. They simply went to make the startling revelation more complete.

At length the coroner stated that he had no further questions to ask, and that the witness might retire if he had nothing further to volunteer which bore upon the case in hand.

"I have no further evidence to offer, your Honor, and gentlemen of the jury," was the earnest response, as the Soft-Hand Detective lost something of his former studied coldness, his eyes gaining fresh fire as he continued: "But I wish to beg still another favor from you, in the interests of justice."

"Speak on, Mr. Dunn," nodded Eppstien, wonderfully changed from the obstinate, surly churl of earlier date. "You have saved us from committing a terrible mistake, if your testimony can be believed, or, I should say, corroborated," with a swift flush at the awkward slip.

"I will make out a full list of the witnesses I alluded to, your Honor, and let you satisfy yourself later," was the quiet response. "But I beg of you to keep all proceedings a profound secret. If the truth as I have shown it to you, should leak out, the real criminals would take the alarm and use double precautions to cover their tracks."

"But I must insist on my poor child's being publicly cleared from this abominable accusation!" flashed Major Mayne, rising to his feet, only to be drawn back by the captain.

"I'll see to that, major," he hurriedly whispered, with a peculiar gleam in his eyes which, luckily, the agitated man failed to note.

Simon Eppstien was once more at sea, and his face plainly showed as much. What of the evidence given by Timothy Timberlake? Was he wholly mistaken in declaring that he recognized Miss Mayne in that late visitor to the office of the deceased? Even if mistaken in her identity, it was hardly possible that he could have been at fault from start to finish; that the veiled lady was but a myth born of a nightmare dream!

"This—of course the young lady whose name has been mentioned can readily prove an *alibi*?" he stammered, after a brief pause.

"The lady is too ill to be questioned on any subject, as Police-Surgeon Branksome stands ready to testify in case of need, sir," coldly responded the Soft-Hand Detective. "But even if perfectly well and able to appear before this court of inquest, I fail to see why she should do so."

"But—the evidence of the janitor!"

"Amounts to less than nothing, as long as my testimony cannot be successfully impeached," was the swift retort. "If, as I offer to prove by a dozen responsible witnesses, it was physically impossible for the murdered man to have written that accusation, what is the only inference possible to be drawn? That the murderer or murderers themselves held and guided the unconscious finger that shaped the letters of blood. Then—would any person bold and cool enough to attempt such a method of covering his or her tracks, accuse herself to all who could read? Unless you are ready to admit this, sir, you must own that there remains not even the shadow of an excuse for dragging a feeble girl from a sick-bed to come before you and swear to her innocence!"

"I, for one," spoke up a member of the jury, "agree with Mr. Dunn in this. I can see no cause for summoning Miss Mayne, at least at the present stage of the inquiry."

"Doubtless the lady in question will be perfectly willing to explain her whereabouts during the hours within which the foul deed must have been committed," coldly resumed the Soft-Hand Detective. "But I wished to ask a favor of you before leaving."

"As many of you doubtless know, I am a professional detective. Not that this lends strength to my reasons for asking this favor, but it may give weight to my assertion that, I think, I can within a very short time run to earth the actual criminals whose work you are now investigating, provided you refrain from casting serious obstacles in my path. If the testimony I have this day given you were to leak out, the guilty ones would at once seek safety in flight. If it is kept a profound secret in the interests of justice, I pledge my sacred honor to bring the red-handed assassins to punishment!"

"To help me in this work, I earnestly beg of you not to make your verdict public under at least one week, without I find the right game inside of that time. Bring in a sealed verdict, as is your perfect right, if you see fit to take that course. Or, if you prefer it, simply meet to adjourn from day to day. Anything, so you don't arm the guilty ones against my pursuit!"

Much more in this same strain Dan Dunn had to say, and Captain Drake also urged the same course, having a little before sent off Major Mayne in charge of Robert Turnbull, on a fictitious call from home.

Simon Eppstien listened with rare patience to their arguments for a man of his disposition, and when they were through, more than half promised to follow their advice, though he covered this concession by adding that he would

first consult with his jury when left alone in their company.

"He'll come to his oats with as good a grace as possible, Dunn," the worthy captain declared as the two men left the office in company. "It sticks in his craw a bit, as the idea didn't originate with himself, but he can't well act otherwise in the face of what we said."

"If he should refuse, I'll drive him out of town!" flashed the Soft-Hand Detective, hotly. "I've got odds enough to fight against without covering his stupid blunders, heaven knows!"

"Count on all the aid in my power, and call on me for funds or men at any hour, day or night," earnestly added the captain, as their hands gripped warmly before parting.

"I thank you for saying so, but I'll fight it out single-handed," was the quiet response. "I've sworn the vendetta, captain. I'd almost hate the man who helped bring those devils to the gallows!"

After all, Simon Eppstien proved more tractable than the two exponents of justice gave him credit for. The jury returned a verdict before the shades of evening fell over the city, and were discharged from further service by his Honor. The simple fact was announced in the city papers, but the promised sensation had to be supplemented by each fertile brain and fluent pencil, elaborating the simple fact that the jury had handed in a "sealed verdict!"

The evening paper whose enterprising reporter had been so soundly caned by Major Nelson Mayne, devoted considerable space to the peculiar vagaries of justice in general and coroners' courts in particular, giving many a thinly-veiled pencil-stab at the "beautiful female" concerned in the case; but Dan Dunn passed the matter by without troubling himself for the present, and with cautioning Robert Turnbull to see that none of these tirades should by any chance find an entrance into the house where Zelma Mayne was still confined to her bed, and the major strictly quarantined through the methods adopted by Captain Drake and the Soft-Hand Detective, the more surely to prevent the truth from leaking out prematurely.

The building was still closely guarded by the police, and not even the most adroit reporter could gain admittance or an interview with any of the inmates. The papers stated, and the belief seemed general, that the verdict as handed in was not final; that the court of inquest had simply adjourned until such a time as Miss Mayne recovered sufficiently to be—some said questioned, but at least one evening paper broadly insinuated an arrest for murder.

Robert Turnbull had faithfully performed the duty assigned him by Dan Dunn. A burial permit was secured, the corpse coffined, a simple service performed in strict privacy; hardly a dozen persons being present besides the solitary mourner, David Tostivan.

The final ceremony was performed late that evening, for while he mourned in all sincerity the only parent whose love and care he had ever known from earliest childhood, Dan Dunn was eager to take up his solemn vendetta, knowing as he did that the trail of the criminals was growing colder with each lost hour.

Despite the seclusiveness shown at the first ceremonial, it soon became an open secret that the murdered man was to be buried that evening, and quite a number of morbid curiosity-seekers were gathered at the beautiful burial-grounds when the simple procession wound through the marble-studded yard.

The pall-bearers were chosen from the Agency to which Dan Dunn belonged, with Robert Turnbull, pale, tearful, looking far more broken in spirit than even the solitary mourner who followed close behind the sable coffin, bareheaded, pale but stonily calm.

The simple ceremony was soon over. The chosen members drew back and waited for the end. Dan Dunn coldly bowed to the sextons, and motioned them to complete their duties.

More like a statue of stone than a man of flesh and blood, he stood by, erect, motionless, unmoved so far as the outward eye could tell, watching the damp earth as it fell in showers into the pit, covering forever from mortal sight the body of Lapier Tostivan.

Then, when the mound was complete, Dan Dunn motioned all to leave him alone with his dead. They obeyed, and he sunk upon his knees by the grave, his clasped hands held low, his face turned upward.

"A prayer?" muttered a closely-veiled woman, as she hastened out through the gate, shivering a little as she added: "To me it looked much more like vowing a bitter vendetta!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE RIVER GIVES UP ITS DEAD.

HARLEQUIN HAT crushed the newspaper in her hand, then flung it to the floor, her eyes flaming, her red lips parting to emit an ejaculation which fell little short of being a masculine oath.

"What does it mean? What is hidden under this mass of froth? Words, words, nothing but empty words!"

She sunk back into the chair from which she had partially risen to discard the paper whose

comments on the "Tostivan case" failed to satisfy her. The surroundings were plain almost to poverty, though the woman herself was too beautiful to need the adventitious aid of fine dress or glittering jewels.

The walls were dingy and bare. A rag-carpet covered the floor. A small, old-fashioned table with oblong leaves, now dropped, stood at one side of the room, covered with a gayly-colored cloth, and supporting a common glass kerosene-lamp, the dim light from which fell across the face and figure of the ex-actress.

Harlequin Hat was plainly dressed; extraordinarily so when her natural taste for finery is considered; but even so, and despite the strong passions to which she was now abandoning herself without restraint or any thought of wearing a mask, she was still beautiful, and strangely, dangerously charming to the masculine eye.

"A sealed verdict!" came from her red lips a few moments later, though hardly audible to her own ears, one of which bore that little but significant birthmark. "What does that mean? That the jury dared not let the truth escape before the guilty one was under arrest? That they are holding the public in suspense to make the end more dramatic? Bah!" with a short, hard laugh that contained far more of rage than of mirth, her white hands clinching tightly. "It's his work—Dan Dunn's last struggle to save his sweetheart from the shameful rope!"

Harlequin Hat stopped in her stormy musings, sitting rigidly erect, her great eyes glowing vividly as they fixed on the door, partly ajar, leading into a narrow hallway. Her attention was attracted by a brief rapping at the front door, but she made no further move or sign that would indicate a purpose of responding to the summons.

There was a brief pause, then a single distinct rap. Another pause of about the same duration, followed by a peculiar knocking at both the top and the bottom of the door, as if a giant was supplementing his knuckles by his toe in his impatience at receiving no answer.

It so, his anger was very methodic, for the high and the low raps came in regular rotation and with the same degree of sound, the only perceptible difference being in their altitude.

Harlequin Hat rose from her chair, tiptoeing to the entry, her red lips moving as though counting the number of raps. As the sounds ceased she seemed satisfied, for without further delay she sprang forward, unlocked and opened the door sufficiently wide for a strong, muscular figure to pass through.

"Wait while I bar out the Philistines, Doc," hurriedly muttered Harlequin Hat, deftly evading the eager greeting of her nocturnal visitor. "Then I'll try to tell you how mighty joyful I am that you've got safely here at last!"

She locked the door, and drew strong bolts, top and bottom, making the barrier so secure that it could be forced only by battering to pieces, should any such attempt be undertaken.

"Follow the light, old friend," she added, with a low, light laugh that could not entirely conceal a certain degree of uneasiness. "I always like to see the eyes of those I talk to!"

Without a word the man obeyed, passing along the narrow entry and crossing the threshold of the room in which Harlequin Hat had been seated, waiting for his coming. He tossed his broad-brimmed slouch-hat to the floor, turned down the high collar of the rough coat he wore, then turned to face the woman, his strong features working with emotion as he awaited her inspection.

This she made with hands clasped before her, head coquettishly turned to one side, her ripe red lips pursed up, arch, malicious.

It was a strong, peculiar face upon which her eyes were gazing, and one that matched well with the muscular, massive yet not ungraceful figure. Dark, yet clear and healthy in color. Smooth-shaven, but with a faint bluish tinge such as comes from the roots of a luxuriantly-growing beard. Features too strong for perfect regularity, yet combining to form a really handsome countenance; a face which, almost involuntarily, one is apt to associate with the Catholic priesthood, as represented by its parish priests in America; as a rule the finest specimens of Irish strength and manly beauty.

Only in looks might that man be coupled with those earnest, conscientious, hard-working missionaries; for he possessed neither religion nor rectitude.

"Well, doctor, prison-life seems to have agreed with you, after all!" slowly uttered Harlequin Hat, after that mocking inspection.

"Is this all? Have you no more kindly greeting for—Hattie!" fierce passions overmastering him as he sprang forward and clasped the woman tightly in his strong arms, pressing kisses upon her face.

Only for a single breath. Then, with a snake-like twist Harlequin Hat partially freed herself, one hand holding a glittering dagger with its keen point quivering almost against his face as she panted:

"Let me go, Craig Dairmid, or I'll send you to a worse pit than the one you've just escaped from!"

Instantly she was released, but the man drop-

ped both hands to his side, making no effort to guard his life, even forcing a smile as his great black eyes glanced past that vicious point to rest upon her hotly-flushing face.

"Strike if you like, Mrs. Haylock," he said, his tones low and even, but with a glimpse of the volcanic passions underlying them. "I've only one life, but that belongs wholly to you. You know that."

"I know you say so, but words are so cheap!"

"What can I do to convince you, Harriet?"

"Behave yourself, as a starter, say!" with a short, hard laugh, as she replaced the glittering weapon in its warm sheath above her heart.

"Could I help it?" hoarsely muttered Craig Dairmid, his eyes seemingly backed by glowing coals as they roved over that still beautiful, still charming face. "Only for you, Hattie, I would now be on my way to almost certain death! Only for you—"

"Consider all that said and properly responded to, doctor," with a slight frown flitting across her countenance. "I did not ask you to come here for the purpose of being overwhelmed by thanks, or—"

"Why did you take so much trouble to save me from that cursed sleuth? Why spend so much time and money and incur so many risks if you shrink from me now as though I was mortal contagion? If you did not mean to—"

"Because I wanted your aid, and was willing to do all and risk all that and more, too, for the sake of securing it," was the swift interjection. "Now—tell me how the little scheme worked, doctor!"

Harlequin Hat sunk into the rocker, motioning the escaped convict to be seated, indicating a chair near the table, where his strong face would be fairly lighted by the rays from the lamp.

Easily as she spoke, there was a vivid gleam in her eyes that warned the man to comply without attempting to pursue his pleading further, just then. Past experience enabled him to rightly interpret that light, and smothering his seething passions for the time being, Craig Dairmid silently complied with her gesture.

"There was no serious hitch in the little trick, doctor?"

"Nothing more than was anticipated and provided for by your men, Mrs. Haylock," was the even response. "It might have been less trying to my nerves, perhaps, had I known for certain just who among the guards were favoring my escape."

"That, of course," with a short nod and faint smile. "But you couldn't ask for the whole earth, Dairmid. It was hard enough to make sure of even so much, for it's no fool of a job to get a bird out of a cage like that without law or license. And though I poured out gold without stint, it was gingerly accepted, and would have been flatly refused unless I also yielded a point or two. One of those points was that not even you were ever to be told which of the employees took a hand in your getting over the garden wall!"

"I am not complaining, be sure, Mrs. Haylock," was the earnest addition, his strong face flushing, his eyes all aglow. "I owe you more than life, and am only longing for the time to come when I can most fitly prove my undying gratitude for your services."

"Maybe that hour is nearer than you think, Dairmid," with a low, metallic laugh. "But let that pass for the present. Strange as it may seem to you, I am wholly in ignorance just how the little trick was carried out, though, of course, I have a general idea. Ever since that night I have been too busy, and have had too much else to think of, for giving this escape more than an occasional passing thought."

The escaped convict turned pale at this unflattering speech, but in no other manner did he show how keenly he was stung. And in even, measured tones he told how he had perfected his escape from the penitentiary.

It is not necessary for his exact words to be placed on record in this connection, since the method of his escaping over the guarded wall of the State Prison has already been placed before the reader.

Enough that he was given ample time by the guards between whose posts the knotted rope had been placed by their aid, to make sure his flight before that alarm shot was fired, not at his phantom-like figure, as the guard afterward declared, but at an imaginary shadow.

He found a man in waiting for him at the base of the great wall, who had already laid the cunning trail of blood and seeming weakness which was to complete the deception, and guided by him, Craig Dairmid passed around the mass of buildings in quite another direction, reaching the river just as the rifle-shot gave the alarm. And when the ringing bell sent out their significant echoes, the convict was lying snugly covered by a tarpaulin in the bottom of one of the two patrol-boats.

Here he lay unsuspected while the search for his body was being made on land and water, his boat being the most active in seeking for the supposed drowning wretch. And then, when the bustle subsided and the authorities decided with reluctance that the convict had in-

deed escaped, though only through death, Craig Dairmid was cautiously set on shore across the river, where he was to spend the coming day in close hiding, then make his way whither he saw fit. The duties of the bribed men went no further than that.

"They left me enough food to keep me from starving, and gave me a hint as to where I would be most likely to find a boat on that side of the river," he resumed. "I stole this the next night and so worked my way down here, hiding by day and traveling only during the dark hours. Though," with a grim smile, "I looked the river tramp to the very life, and might have passed unsuspected through a crowd. But you said I was not to take any extra risks, and of course I obeyed. You said I was to make the best of my way to town, and I did so. I found the provisions you made for me, and—I am here to ask how I can repay you for all you have done for me."

"You understand just how important that service was, doctor?"

"I think I do. I was to be pardoned for the Coventry affair, only to be arrested the instant I crossed the line, on a charge of murder. Dan Dunn was to make the arrest."

At the mention of that hated name, Harlequin Hat seemed turned into a fury, her eyes glowing, her face convulsed, her hands clinching until it seemed as though the finger-tips would sink out of sight in the firm flesh.

"Curse him—curse him from crown to sole and all the way back again!" she hoarsely cried. "You name that bloodhound, and still ask me why I have taken so much trouble, run so much risk to set you free? To aid me in destroying him, body and soul, Craig Dairmid!"

"I'll do it—on certain conditions, Hattie," was the response.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CRAIG DAIRMID NAMES HIS PRICE.

DESPITE her own impetuous emotions just then, Harlequin Hat was startled by the manner in which the escaped convict uttered those few words. Cool, even, unemphasized though they were, they conveyed a far from reassuring meaning to a woman of her keen wits.

Instantly she resumed her former cool composure, half-smiling as she gazed into that strong, resolute face. She had no difficulty in divining his meaning, after what had already passed between them, but she deemed best to at least disguise her convictions for the present.

"On conditions, did you say, doctor?" her brows arching slightly. "To be imposed by you, or by me? I fear I hardly understand you."

"And I fear you understand me only too clearly, Mrs. Haylock," was the subdued retort, his face growing a shade paler, and one hand going up as if to shade the light from his eyes.

"Because, don't you know, dear doctor," softly supplemented the woman, her tones mild and purring as those of a sleepy cat, "I really imagined that I had done enough for you to deserve your fullest service without conditions of any sort from your side of the board."

Mild though her manner of speech was, it stung the convict deeply, and great as were his powers of self-control, he could not entirely conceal this from those keen, lustrous eyes.

"You have, Mrs. Haylock. I owe you more than life, and I'm willing to repay that service as fully as mortal man can. But—"

Harlequin Hat gave a start, real or assumed, and ejaculated:

"What! can it be that—was it because I asked you to aid me in breaking down Dan Dunn? Are you such a coward as to shrink from joining hands with a weak woman in destroying a pitiless sleuth like he has proved himself? And he the man whose cunning sent you to the Pen? He, whose tireless hatred raked up that black affair by which he hoped to turn you off the gallows? Craig Dairmid, are you a coward?"

Then there was a brief silence after this fierce outburst. Harlequin Hat, her queenly form drawn proudly erect, her beautiful face flushed, her great eyes filled with conflicting rage and doubt and scorn. The escaped convict leaning an elbow on the table, one hand shading his dark eyes from the lamplight, his face pale but immobile, his eyes fixed steadily upon the woman who flung that biting taunt in his teeth.

"I may be the coward you call me, Mrs. Haylock," he deliberately uttered, not a muscle of his face altering. "I am a coward if to feel a certain degree of awe at the mention of Dan Dunn be cowardice. I admit it frankly; he is the only man I ever met who could send a cold shiver through my veins. He is the only man living whom I would not pit myself against without stopping to count the cost. And yet—if I was really the coward you hint, would I deliberately walk right into the den of this human tiger?"

"Not even to square accounts with the man who branded you as a jail-bird?" flashed the woman, her lips curling as with scorn.

"Not even to square accounts with Dan Dunn," was the deliberate response. "If revenge alone fired me, I would never have turned my face in this direction when once fairly clear

of that living hell. I would have toiled night and day to get still further away from him. I would have made my way at once to the trackless West, there to hide myself too securely for even his keen senses to discover me."

"Then why did you come to town? Why are you not running away from your own shadow?"

"Because you lived here, Mrs. Haylock," was the swift response. "Because you told me you would be waiting for me here. Because that thought was enough to make me face a thousand Dan Dunns, if this globe was big enough to shelter so many."

Harlequin Hat gave an affected start, her face gradually turning from grave to gay as she gazed intently into his dark countenance. It was a neat bit of acting, but acting it surely was, for she could never have been in doubt as to his full meaning.

"For my sake, was it, doctor? If—if I was not so old, so faded, so broken down by grief and trials, I'd almost—"

"Finish what you set out to say, please."

"I'd almost suspect you had fallen in love with me!" she added, ending with a low, musical laugh that sent the hot blood rushing into that strong, resolute face.

"Why not quite believe it, Hattie?" he slowly asked, dropping his hand and facing her more fully, his tones growing less measured as he continued: "Is it so preposterous? If I am an escaped convict, have I not had good company in the same pen? If I am hunted of men, are not others in a like peril if the whole truth was to be made known?"

"Harriet Haylock, for instance?"

"On that score, Hattie, you have little the better of me; hardly enough to give you license to scorn me, because I am not what the world terms an honest man," he steadily resumed, his burning gaze holding her eyes enchained despite herself. "As for loving you—listen!"

"I first learned to love you when we were both engaged in playing a bold game for the Coventry fortune, up-river, at St. Joseph. I kept my secret from even your bright, keen eyes, as you will admit, Hattie, for then your husband was alive. He was my friend. I loved him, as you ought to know. And while he lived I fought down my mad passion, not even admitting that it was real to myself. And if Horace had lived on, these words would never have been given to you, though I had to eat my heart out in silent despair!"

Despite herself Harlequin Hat was strongly impressed by his words and his manner, though she knew that she could never feel a spark of such love as he evidently hoped for. But she could not help secretly admitting that he was proving himself a man, though an evil one.

"Isn't that rather premature, doctor?" she softly uttered. "Don't you think such a confession would come with better grace from one who had granted, rather than denied, the first favor I asked of him after saving his neck from the hangman's noose?"

"Would my success be as sure if I were to do your bidding first?" he flashed, with a brief, grim smile. "Hardly, Hattie. You would laugh me to scorn, and then cast me aside like a worn-out glove. Now—give me your promise to be my wife as soon as your present hopes are fulfilled, and I'll be your unquestioning slave through fire and flood!"

"Would you take a woman for a wife who admits that she is past all power of loving, Craig Dairmid?"

"I would take you, even on less favorable terms, Hattie," was the unhesitating response. "I would take you, even if you were to swear that you not only did not love me, but that you hated me. I would take you even thus, and trust to my strong passion to wake you to life and love again. Ay!" his dark eyes glowing redly, his face flushing with the passions which were growing too deep for even his iron will to longer hold in subjection. "And I would make you love me as you never loved before!"

The instant the last sentence crossed his lips, Craig Dairmid regretted its utterance. He saw her beautiful face pale, then grow even colder. He knew that her thoughts were going back to her dead husband, to Horace Haylock, whom Dan Dunn had hunted to his grave.

But the mistake was made, and his words could not be recalled. He could only cover the slip as completely as possible.

"Remember, Hattie, that I do not ask you to yield yourself all in a breath. I am willing to give you any reasonable length of time in which to bring yourself to accept a true and loving mate. All I ask is for a positive pledge that you will thus reward me, when the task you have undertaken be thoroughly accomplished. Give me that pledge, and I'll not annoy you with love-talk until my own time comes. And when you have promised what I ask, I will be your blind slave, ready to do and dare all you can ask of me. I will help you hunt Dan Dunn to his death. I will strike him through those nearest and dearest to his heart, if you prefer to make him suffer thus before shutting his wind."

He stopped short as he saw Harlequin Hat give a start, her great eyes flashing swiftly into

his face with a half-frightened look in their lustre depths.

"What do you know? What have you heard since reaching town?" she almost fiercely demanded, one hand creeping up to her bosom where her dagger habitually nestled in hiding.

"Almost nothing, Hattie," was the quick response, though he was not quite able to conceal his surprise at her sudden alteration. "I only struck town late last night. I at once crept into a snug hole, waiting until I could get word to you before venturing out of hiding. I was too nearly played for asking many questions, and very little news was volunteered by my friends."

Harlequin Hat quickly recovered her nerves, laughing faintly as if ashamed of having so lost her balance, but she made no effort toward explaining the cause of her sudden outburst.

"You say that you will only serve me on this condition, Dairmid?" she asked, growing cold and composed once more.

"Only on that condition, Hattie," was the resolute response.

"What if I was to reject it?"

"I fear you will, but I'll hope on while hope is possible."

"Do you know that it is I who should impose conditions? Do you know that inside of five minutes I could put the hounds of the law on your track? That I hold your life in the hollow of my hand, doctor?"

"My life, but not my liberty, Hattie! I may be taken, but never alive, never for the noose. I'll kill while I can, and end with taking my own life!" flashed the escaped convict, not angrily, not hotly, but with cold, deadly resolution that deprived his words of all semblance of boasting or bluster.

More completely than ever did Harlequin Hat realize that, despite his evil deeds, there was much of true manhood about this convict. And though she suffered naught of it to appear in her eyes, she regarded him with growing interest which might—never that!

Her heart was dead. She had loved, and in losing that loved one, had lost all capacity for loving another man.

"If I refuse, what will you do, Craig Dairmid?" she slowly asked.

"Wait and watch until your present game comes to an end," was the grave response. "If you fail—and fail you must, against that human bloodhound, unless you have hands armed with more than mere avarice or lust for revenge about you, Hattie! If you fail, I will avenge you on that demon. If you succeed without my aid, I will go my way, to live out my life as best I can. And when I die, it will be whispering your name as that of the only woman—since my mother—who won my love."

"And if I should tell you that I—I love another man?" slowly asked the woman, her eyes glowing curiously as she watched the effect of her words.

There was no immediate reply. Slowly all color faded out of that face, leaving it white and ghastly, save for the peculiar bluish tint cast over his cheeks and strong chin by his hidden beard. His hands clinched until the bones audibly snapped. But when, after a breathless pause, he spoke, his tones were cold and even despite his intensity:

"If you love another man, Harriet Haylock, and care for his life, keep his name and identity concealed from me. As surely as there is a heaven above our heads this night, I will kill him without mercy the first moment I can come within arm's-length of such a person!"

Harlequin Hat broke into a light laugh, though there was something hysterical in its echoes. Despite her strong nerves, this new phase of her old partner's character was almost frightening her.

"I do love—but my love is lying in the grave, doctor," she said, all traces of mirth, real or false, vanishing from face and voice, as she rapidly resumed: "But if I cannot gain your services at a less high price, why—perhaps—"

"Say it, Hattie!" flashed Dairmid, springing to his feet with outstretched hands, but holding himself back by a desperate effort of will. "Say you will marry me, and I'll kill Dan Dunn before the week is out!"

"Kill him, and I'll kill you without mercy!" flashed Harlequin Hat with sudden fire confronting the astounded convict.

CHAPTER XIX.

A GLIMPSE OF TRUTH.

It was a wild, preposterous notion, but the bare idea caused Craig Dairmid to shrink back where he had unflinchingly faced the menacing steel, and his words were hardly articulate as he panted hoarsely:

"You dare not—you love Dan Dunn, Harriet Haylock?"

It was Harlequin Hat's turn for amazement, and for a single breath she failed to catch the full purport of his speech. When she did comprehend the strange error into which he had fallen, a queer smile lit up her face and a low laugh bubbled from her lips.

"I love Dan Dunn, do you ask, doctor?" she uttered, looking almost tigerishly beautiful as she smiled into his face, a glimpse of her even

white teeth contrasting with the rich red of her full lips. "Ay! I love him far too much to permit you to kill him in such a hurry, my good friend! A thousand times too dearly to bear the thought of dispatching him out of this world by the limited express, before he can fully realize what it is to have the wife of murdered Horace Haylock for an enemy!"

Craig Dairmid drew a long breath, one hand dropping to the table as if to lend his powerful limbs support.

"I was a fool, Hattie," he said, in humbled tone. "I never would have made such a mistake in my sober senses. But—you were ever a bewildering enigma to me, and—I love you so madly!"

His hands came forward with an appealing gesture, but he stopped short as Harlequin Hat made an imperative gesture.

"I have not signed the bond as yet, Dairmid," she said, with a quick gleam in her great eyes. "I do not say I will ever sign it, but I certainly shall not do so if you are going to lose your head and play the love-sick schoolboy with every shift of the wind!"

"If you knew what I suffered, Hattie, penned alive in that earthly Tophet, kept from you, from even hearing from you save at long intervals, and then only through the screen and under close watch—too close for questions to be asked or answered. If you knew how bitter it was for me to be kept so completely in the dark, not knowing but what you were improving your liberty by—by—"

"Love and sweet breezes, doctor?" with a careless laugh that cut him to the very quick.

He fell back to his former position, seating himself and leaning an elbow on the table, the easier to shade his eyes from the direct rays of the lamp. His face was very pale, but by that alone he showed how hard a fight he was waging against his passions.

Harlequin Hat likewise re-seated herself, nodding her head as if in approval over his change of demeanor.

"That is more like it, partner! You can keep the curb on if you see fit, and if you and I are to work together for the future, you cannot begin the practice too soon."

"It rests wholly with you, Harriet."

"With me to lay down the law, and with you to frankly say whether or no my dictum is acceptable, Dairmid," amended the woman, giving him one of her sweetest smiles by way of compensation. "You say you love me. You say you will work under my lead only on conditions?"

The escaped convict bowed a silent assent, as though he did not dare trust himself to speak further on that subject just then.

"If I agree to accept that condition, will you make me a solemn promise in return?"

"Swear that you will marry me when Dan Dunn is punished to suit your pleasure, Hattie, and I'll give any pledge in return which you may demand," was the slow, labored response.

"If I bind you, under penalty of losing your reward, to refrain from all attempts at love-making?"

"Even that, so long as I know I will reap my reward in the end!"

"I can trust you. You can trust yourself, Dairmid?"

"Did you ever know me to fail, through weakness of my own, Hattie?"

Even after this Harlequin Hat hesitated, her eyes drooping, her face revealing the doubts which filled her brain. It was not a matter of delicacy, and still less of love. It was purely a question of prudence, and whether the profits would overbalance the risks.

She knew that in all her list of acquaintances there was not another one to be found on whose bulldog courage and blind fidelity she could so implicitly rely as on those qualities in Craig Dairmid. It was to avail herself of them in her coming fight with Dan Dunn that she had so patiently, so adroitly, so boldly plotted the escape of No. 1213 from the Penitentiary. With him at her side, ready to strike in her behalf, she had felt almost certain of ultimate victory. Never once had she dreamed of such a move on his part.

Swiftly, closely, thoroughly she weighed the case in her busy brain, and then her decision was tersely given:

"Under that single proviso, Craig, I'll pledge you my word to marry you by way of pay for the work I lay out for you. Now—one kiss, if you will have it—"

In silence Craig Dairmid placed the seal on her red lips, shivering just perceptibly as he returned to his seat. There had been no response to his passionate caress. Was it indeed true that this woman's heart was dead beyond all revival?

"Now to business, doctor," briskly uttered Harlequin Hat, brushing aside all sentiment as though she regretted the time lost through it so far. "You say you have not heard much news since striking town; then perhaps you are still unaware of the fact that Dan Dunn has already begun to sup sorrow?"

A tinge of color leaped into the face of the convict, and his dark eyes gained a reddish sheen as he silently shook his head in the nega-

tive. Harlequin nodded sharply, her lips curling back from her teeth.

"All the town is ringing with it, and the newspapers are reveling in the sensation. I wonder that some of the lads didn't let drop—"

"I heard some mention of a murdered man, but—"

"Lapier Tostivan, father to Dan Dunn as we best know the immortal David!" flashed Harlequin Hat. "I forgot that you knew the bloodhound only as a detective; but let it pass at that."

"It happened on the very night of your scaling the garden-wall, Dairmid," with a low, mocking laugh of pitiless exultation. "And by another remarkable coincidence I, too, was absent from town on that same occasion! If not—well, when you take the trouble to recall the bitter oath I swore over the body of my murdered husband, Dairmid, you can readily guess in which direction Dan Dunn's first suspicions would have turned, only for that lucky chance!"

"Was it purely chance, Hattie?" slowly asked the convict.

"Call it fidelity to an old partner, if you like it better, dear," with a peculiar smile. "I was hastening to Jefferson City to receive you when set at liberty, bent on providing you with an honest, decent chance for a living. And, by another curious coincidence, Dan Dunn was a fellow-passenger. Of course I could not guess his object in paying a visit to the Pen, but I frankly told him what carried me there."

"It was bold—and risky, Harriet!" with a troubled frown. "That demon is terribly keen and hard to blind!"

"I counted all the chances before I made a move, and chose the surest course," was the confident reply. "Dan Dunn might suspect, but he could never prove that I had aught to do with the blow which was being dealt him through those whom he loved best on earth. And I had an *alibi* prepared which covered a full week back."

"Tell me about it. I hardly gave the stray words a passing thought at the time, but—wasn't there some woman mixed up in it?"

"The girl whom Dan Dunn hoped to marry, long before the dog-days. The second person alive for whom he felt pure, deep, undying love. And now—his father is dead and in his grave. His sweetheart rests under suspicion of having murdered that father. And Dan Dunn begins at last to reap his fit reward for the bitter black day up yonder by the marshy shore of Lake Contrary!"

Leaning forward with hands resting on his knees, Craig Dairmid eagerly drank in this news, his flushing face, his glowing eyes, his quickened breath betraying how sweet was revenge even at second-hand upon the man who had ruined his brightest hopes and hunted him to the hideous doom of a convict.

"All this—and I had no part in it!" he panted.

"And I was far away, speeding to serve a good friend in misfortune!" laughed Harlequin Hat, softly. "Of course I was, for I can prove as much by Dan Dunn himself if the question ever arises. Yet—only for me, Lapier Tostivan would still be alive and hearty! Only for me, Zelna Mayne would be gay and happy, her little brain filled with visions of bridal veils and orange-blossoms, instead of black caps and choking nooses! Only for me, doctor! Think of it!"

"Yet you were far away, Hattie?"

"As I can prove, remember," again with that peculiar laugh and brilliant flashing of her eyes. "And yet—listen, Dairmid, and see how perfectly easy it is to dye another's hand in human blood!"

"In her sober senses Zelna Mayne would rather have strangled herself with her own Indian-locks of sable hair than brought harm to the venerable father of her promised husband. And yet—when a master-mind commanded her to rise and quit her home; to pass through the dark streets and gain an entrance to the office of her destined victim in that big, silent, gloomy, almost deserted building, she blindly obeyed!"

"And when this same master-mind commanded her to stab Lapier Tostivan to the heart, she obeyed without hesitation! And then—still under that subtle yet powerful influence which was in olden times termed mesmerism, and which is now styled hypnotism—this dainty maiden used the finger of the dying man, dipped in the hot blood that flowed from his cloven heart, to accuse herself of the crime in scarlet letters on the painted wall!"

Swiftly Harlequin Hat uttered these words, and in scarcely less excitement did Craig Dairmid listen to her speech.

It was a less incredible recital to him than it would have been to the vast majority of mankind, for in the days gone by he had given the subject much thought and no little patient investigation; and this with a view to making use of the art or science, whichever term best fits the curious force, in bending Rena Coventry to their ends, while playing for the rich stake to be won through her. In that instance it had failed him, for Rena Coventry seemed proof

against the curious influence; but during their experiments he had discovered in Harlequin Hat a remarkable power over weaker minds.

"But—you were so far away at the time!" he stammered.

"Balance that by the incentive I had to concentrate my powers, and can you say that the feat was impossible, doctor?" laughed the woman.

Dairmid made no immediate reply. It might not be impossible, but he knew it was hardly probable.

"If all worked so smoothly, why did the boys talk of her being under suspicion alone? Surely Dan Dunn could not have the face to save the one who killed his own father?"

"If he has not so interfered, why the delay?" flashed Harlequin Hat, all exultation vanishing from her face to give place to bitter doubt and fierce anger. "Why did the jury bring in what the papers call a sealed verdict? Why has Zelna Mayne escaped arrest to this hour?—Why—unless that demon loves her too madly to give her up to justice!"

"Even so, she can be arrested for the crime on a regular warrant sworn out by any person who—"

Craig Dairmid never finished that sentence. Even as Harlequin Hat bent eagerly toward him, listening breathlessly, her great eyes glowing with a tigerish luster, there sounded a quick, sharp rapping at the front door.

The escaped convict sprung to his feet, pale as a corpse, drawing a brace of revolvers from under his heavy coat, backing toward the further corner of the room, and muttering hoarsely:

"Never alive! Never back to that living hell alive!"

CHAPTER XX.

A SHOCK FOR HARLEQUIN HAT.

HARLEQUIN HAT also sprung to her feet, but it seemed more from eager excitement than fear, though she shrunk a little further from the desperate convict, as though she half anticipated danger from that source rather than the producer of that peremptory rapping at the front door. It may have been that she dreaded lest Dairmid might suspect her of having lured him into a trap for his enemies.

"Put up your guns, doctor," she hurriedly muttered, quickly rallying and forcing a short laugh. "It is a friend whom even you must learn to trust."

"If you say so, Hattie," his tense muscles relaxing.

"I do say so. If you are my right hand, he is entitled to be called my left, and I'll go bail for him. Still, if you prefer to hide—"

"Shall I let him in, Hattie?" quietly asked Dairmid, putting his weapons out of sight and picking up his hat, to slouch it over his strong face.

"I might lose a prospective husband," laughed the woman as she shook her head negatively.

"He's terribly earnest, our good friend, and though you have nothing to fear from him on that score, I admit that he sometimes tries to play the ardent lover."

"I have your pledge, Hattie," was the calm response; but quietly as the words came, Harlequin Hat noted how redly those dark eyes glowed at that hint.

Still, she gave no sign, and gliding from the room, began a faint series of signals at the closed door. These were answered, and without further delay she opened the barrier to admit a lithe, graceful figure behind whom she quickly closed the door.

While she was doing this, Craig Dairmid altered his position so that his own face would be cast into the shadow while giving him a fair chance for scanning the new-comer as soon as he should enter the room. He was not kept long in suspense, for Harlequin Hat hastened back with the stranger close at her heels.

She turned as the threshold was crossed, waving a hand toward the escaped convict, simply saying:

"A friend of mine, Alva Parrish. Mr. Jones, one of us. You should turn out good friends, since we are all working for one end: the downfall of Dan Dunn, the Soft-Hand Detective."

The two men bowed stiffly, and Harlequin Hat frowned as she saw that neither made an offer toward clasping hands. But before she could say aught, even if she had deemed it wisest, Alva Parrish turned squarely away from "Mr. Jones," bowing over her white hand and pressing it to his lips in a most lovely fashion.

With a faint murmur of impatience, Harlequin Hat freed her hand from his ardent grasp, flashing a glance toward Craig Dairmid, as though doubtful how he would take this action. He gave no sign, standing erect, coldly yet closely taking the measure of this stranger to him.

He saw a man of probably forty years, or in the very prime of life so far as Alva Parrish was concerned. Not tall, but little if any above the mean height of his sex. Slender, yet lithe and powerful beyond his weight. Dark in face, with hair black as midnight, close cropped to his skull, yet not entirely ungraceful for that. His face was smooth as that of a child, and gave

no evidence of a growing beard. But his most noticeable characteristic was to be found in his eyes: large, blue as the unclouded skies of summer, despite his swarthy complexion and jetty hair. This was curious enough in itself, but it was a fact hardly to be noticed by a stranger, thanks to the vivid, strange, unearthly light by which those orbs seemed backed. At first glance they reminded one of the fiery orbs of a maniac, and though that impression might be weakened by familiarity, even his closest intimate could never feel perfectly sure that Alva Parrish was wholly sane.

His voice was remarkably sweet and musical, so far as it was heard on this occasion, though Craig Dairmid more than suspected it was rendered thus through love for the woman to whom he alone addressed his remarks.

"You have succeeded, Parrish?" demanded Harlequin Hat, sinking back into her chair, her eyes aglow, her face pale with strong emotions.

"Would I dare come to sun myself in the light of your—"

"Business, Parrish!" with a swift frown darkening her face.

"I have discovered the secret which you bade me ferret out, madam," coldly yet sweetly responded the owner of those curious eyes.

"What is the secret, then?" flashed Harlequin Hat. "In one word!"

"That is beyond my power, madam," smiled Parrish, seemingly not averse to avenging himself on the woman who treated him so brusquely.

Harlequin Hat frowned darker than ever, but she knew that she must humor this man if she was to use him, and choking down her fierce impatience to learn the truth which had so annoyingly perplexed her brain, she spoke more pleasantly:

"Tell the story after your own fashion, then, Parrish, but cut it as short as you conveniently can."

"Now and here?" hesitated the shadow, with a barely perceptible inclination of his head toward the escaped convict.

"Am I in your way, Hattie?" quietly asked Dairmid, purposely using the name as a pointed hint to Parrish that they twain were on intimate terms. "If so, my business can be finished at a later hour."

"You are not in the way. We three are playing the same game, and one must know just as much as the others. Let that be understood by both of you, gentlemen, once for all."

"Shall I address the gentleman as Mr. Jones, or by his rightful cognomen, madam?" sweetly asked the shadow, just the ghost of a smile flitting across his thin face.

"As Craig Dairmid when there is no possibility of being overheard by any one outside of the family; as Jones on all other occasions," was the prompt response, though her face perceptibly flushed under that half-mocking gaze.

"Thanks," with a slight bow. "It is just as well to have these little points fully understood at the start. And now—you wish to hear how I got at the secret of that sealed verdict, I believe?"

"Just as speedily as your unusually fluent tongue will grant me, sir," frowned the woman, nervously toying with her own fingers.

"It is my pleasure, as well as my duty, to obey you, Mrs. Haylock. First, I naturally tried the most simple methods of getting at the secret, since you were in haste to learn the whole truth. I failed, else I should have been able to make my report at an earlier hour."

"Next, I discovered that one of the gentlemen composing the jury, John Mennifee by name, to be explicit, lived in a house rather larger than was necessary for himself and worthy wife, for they had no olive branches. Second, I learned that they sometimes rented rooms in the second story to gentlemen. Third, I made up as a respectable elderly party just from the country, who wished a quieter lodging-place than any of the hotels afforded. I was recommended to John Mennifee by a gentleman who knew him, but really I had forgotten his name, and—"

"Must you go through with all this?" impatiently demanded Harlequin Hat, unable longer to control her eagerness to learn the truth. "Do you want to drive me crazy, man?"

Alva Parrish smiled sweetly, but with a malicious glitter in his remarkable eyes. It he was bent on punishing her for his brusque reception, so different from what he had a right to expect, his ends were apparently served, for he spoke more to the point after that.

"I secured the lodgings. I contrived to gain a fair idea of the family arrangements without doing or saying aught to awaken suspicion on the part of my landlord or landlady. And when I found that there was no possible mode of eavesdropping their probable talk after retiring for the night, from any point outside the chamber, I quickly decided to cast all dignity to the winds and debase myself to the level of a sneak-thief!"

"I watched my chance, and crept well under the conjugal couch. I was right in my surmises, for hardly had the loving couple retired before the wife began pumping her husband as to what that sealed verdict meant, over which

the papers were making such a to-do. And after a gallant fight the honest John surrendered, just as I felt from the first he would be obliged to do."

"And the secret?" breathlessly demanded Harlequin Hat.

"Was even more amazing to me than it possibly could be to the worthy old lady," slowly replied Parrish, growing grave, even uneasy as those blue eyes flashed so vividly. "Dan Dunn swore positively that his father was physically unable to write with his right hand, and therefore could not possibly have traced those accusing letters on the wall, which declared Zelna Mayne killed him!"

Harlequin Hat sat like one suddenly turned to stone, and even Craig Dairmid showed his intense amazement at this startling announcement. Parrish ceased speaking, standing motionless save for the hand that nervously pinched his under lip.

That stupor was of brief duration. Harlequin Hat gave a choking cry of inarticulate rage as she leaped to her feet, flashing a dagger before the glowing eyes of the human shadow. If he had flinched in the least, if he had even lifted a hand to ward off the threatened stroke, his life would surely have been sacrificed to the speechless fury of the scheming adventuress.

Instead, Alva Parrish seemed to throw all his wonderful powers of magnetism into his glowing orbs, and after a visible struggle Harlequin Hat staggered back, falling into her chair, gasping hoarsely:

"You—you swore to do it! You swore to make clean work—"

"Have I not kept my word, Harriet Haylock?" coldly demanded the strange being, never removing his burning gaze from her livid countenance. "Could I perform impossibilities, and provide against the unknowable? Did you not yourself declare that you had given me every possible information concerning both Zelna Mayne and Lapier Tostivan?"

"I did not know—it is a lie, hatched by that demon in human guise!" flashed the enraged woman, hurling her dagger from her with a force that drove its blade to the very hilt through the door-panel. "All a cunning lie to save the life of his love!"

"I am afraid not," more mellowly uttered Parrish, his eyes drooping for the first time since he uttered those bitter words. "Mennifee told his wife that Dan Dunn gave them the names of unimpeachable witnesses who testified that they knew it to be a positive fact that the dead man had been so afflicted. Among them was Dr. Amos Vreeland, whom Tostivan consulted with a view to a surgical operation if he could be cured by anything of the sort."

With a violent effort Harlequin Hat partially recovered her self-control, hoarsely uttering:

"Go on. What else? Did he tell what was the real nature of the verdict? Was the girl entirely cleared? If so, why is the house still guarded by the police?"

"The verdict was one of willful murder against parties unknown to the jury, with the addition that there was no reliable evidence as to the complicity of the lady whose name was found on the wall above the head of the deceased."

"And the police guard? Why are they maintained?"

"As a means of keeping the guilty ones in the dark as to the actual nature of the sealed verdict."

"Then we are worse than defeated in our first steps!"

"Unfortunately, I fear we are, madam. If I had been better posted, I would have willed Zelna Mayne to have used his left hand, but—"

"Enough—leave me for now!" hoarsely cried Harlequin Hat, motioning both men away. "I must be alone—I must have time to think this horrible matter all over!"

"You are ill, Hattie," murmured Dairmid, approaching, but only to have that harsh command repeated with doubled emphasis.

And with her own hands Harlequin Hat opened the door to let them out, then staggered back to the room—to think!

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SOFT-HAND DETECTIVE AT HOME.

FOUR days after the burial of Lapier Tostivan, and at nearly the same twilight hour, Dan Dunn sat musing in the office where his father had come by his death.

His face showed signs of the past heavy strain on his nerves, and he seemed to have aged a year for every day that had passed without apparently bringing him a step nearer the true solution of that crime.

He had sent Robert Turnbull to see if a flaw could be found in the cunning *alibi* prepared by Harlequin Hat, only to fail. The only ray of hope in that direction lay in the fact that the ex-actress was not now to be found in or about Hermann, though it was true that she had purchased a modest little cottage with vineyard attached, which was being cozily fitted up for her speedy occupancy.

The Soft-Hand Detective was gazing vacantly at the wall where that scarlet accusation against

his promised bride had appeared, but was now naught, when a faint, hesitating tapping at his office-door aroused him with a start.

The heavy carpet deadened his footfalls, and there was no warning sound attending his response to that summons. The door swung quickly open, to reveal the shrinking figure of a woman.

The corridor was rather gloomy at that hour, and at his first look Dan Dunn could distinguish hardly more than this: that his visitor was a woman, wrapped in a loose cloak, and that she seemed frightened by his confronting her so abruptly.

But then—a peculiar thrill ran through his being as he saw how brilliantly her eyes shone through the gloom. And instinctively his thoughts reverted to what Zelna Mayne had said concerning the eyes of the strange woman who had called upon her at her home the evening of the night on which that foul crime was committed in her name.

"This—I reckon maybe I've made a mistake, sir," faltered the stranger, shrinking still further back, but flashing those remarkably bright eyes through the doorway and over as much of the room beyond as possible without a change of position on the part of their owner. "I was never here but once before, and—is it where the poor gentleman was—was killed, master?"

"This is the office in which Mr. Tostivan was found dead," bowed the Soft-Hand Detective, stilling his whirling brain by a wonderful exertion of will. "I am occupying it for the present. Can I be of any service to you, madam?"

"You are not—may I ask your name, young master?" timidly ventured the woman, advancing a trifle, her eyes seeming to increase in luster until the detective fancied they must be arranged on the same principle as a reflecting-lamp.

"My name is Dunn."

"Not the great detective? Not the son of Lapier Tostivan?"

With still greater eagerness the woman uttered these words, one brown but shapely hand grasping his wrist, the other touching his shoulder as if to turn him with his face more to the light which came from the windows across the room.

"Lapier Tostivan was my father. Why do you ask?"

"Because—I wish to know—I fear that I had a part in that awful crime, sir!" was the almost hysterical response.

Starting as was that broken announcement, it served to steady Dan Dunn instead of shaking him still further. Instantly his hot blood seemed to cool, his disturbed brain to grow clear, his nerves to regain their normal condition. His voice was quiet and even as he spoke:

"No evil or intentional part, madam, I feel confident; but as the son and sole living relative of that foully murdered man, I have the right to ask a further explanation on your part. Will you oblige me by stepping inside?"

Without a word in response the strange being brushed past the Soft-Hand Detective and entered the office. Dan Dunn followed, closing the door behind them, and silently turning the key.

Although the office had an eastern exposure, and the sun had some little time been below the horizon, there was sufficient light sifting in through the tall windows to fairly well serve the purpose of Dan Dunn's cool but keen eyes just then.

The woman was glancing around the apartment, a curiously timid yet eager gaze, as though she longed while dreading to find the object she thus sought. She seemed hardly conscious that the detective was with her, and there seemed nothing to prevent Dan Dunn from deliberately proving or disproving the wild fancy which began to take shape in his startled brain.

His visitor was tall, and seemed of fairly good shape, despite the apparent clumsiness lent her figure by the old-fashioned cloak. The hood which was attached to this had partly fallen back from the woman's head, and Dan Dunn could see she wore a gay-hued cap or head-dress, formed from a silken handkerchief, after the habit of family servants in the South.

But there was little of the negro in her features, though her skin was swarthy enough to pass for a mulatto, at least, and her hair, falling in twin loops over the sides of her face, then curving up and backward under the 'kerchief, was straight and still less like that of a negro. And her eyes—

Dan Dunn could not entirely refrain from starting as they suddenly turned upon his own face. Not alone because of their remarkable brilliancy, but because they so poorly matched that swarthy complexion and jet-black hair, being blue as the summer skies!

Nor was this all. Though he failed to trace any great resemblance so far as the facial features alone were concerned, those eyes kept Dan Dunn thinking constantly of Harlequin Hat. Only for that strange brilliancy, which he had never noticed in her eyes, he could almost have taken oath he was gazing directly into the lustrous orbs of the woman whom he firmly believed was at the bottom of all this evil-doing!

"I read the papers, young master," hurriedly

uttered the woman, her eyes again wandering around the room. "I do not find them—I cannot see the words they told of. Was it all a lie, or—did you rub them out because you would not believe their truth, young master?"

"I must first know your reasons for taking such a deep interest in this affair, madam," coldly responded Dan Dunn, her every word but deepening his wild fancy that she was Harlequin Hat in a cunning disguise. "You said you had cause to believe you played a part in the death of Lapier Tostivan. May I ask what you meant by saying that?"

"I came here to tell you that, young master," was the answer, given in a more composed fashion, though those remarkable eyes still roved restlessly about the room, flashing frequent glances into the pale face of the Soft-Hand Detective. "I only learned of it this very day. I go out but little, and I have been ill. Too ill to hear gossip or read the papers, young master."

"You only heard of the murder this day, you say?" asked Dan Dunn, striking a match and lighting a couple of gas-jets, then crossing the room to pull down the inside blinds. "I am listening, madam."

"I knew then that it was the kind gentleman who—Right where you stand now, young master!" with startling intensity in her tones, though she lowered her voice to a sibilant whisper as she pointed to the floor. "Right there he stood when he gave me his solemn pledge to right my wrongs—when he vowed that, let fall the blow never so heavily on a head dear and near to him, he would tear the fair mask from the foul faces of the brazen impostors!"

"My father took this vow?" slowly demanded Dan Dunn, shifting his position as if startled by her dramatic action, but really in hopes of solving his growing doubts and suspicions.

More than ever he believed that this was Harlequin Hat, using her remarkable skill in "making up" to face him in disguise, for some evil purpose of her own. And as he saw how carefully the dead-black hair was brought down below the ears before curving up and back, he felt almost certain that it was an old-time dressing revived for the express purpose of concealing the peculiar birthmark through which Harlequin Hat had once before been unmasked by himself!

"He did," was the instant response, in more natural tones. "But it was quite as much to save his loved son from falling into the toils of unscrupulous adventurers, as to avenge the bitter wrongs of a poor woman whose whole life—Eternal curses fall upon and blight Nelson Mayne and his child of tainted blood!"

"You have known the gentleman, then?" coldly asked Dan Dunn, though the hot blood leaped into his face at that fierce insinuation against his promised wife. "You told Lapier Tostivan something like this?"

"I told him, as I tell you, his son, that negro blood flows in the veins of Zelna Mayne! That Indian blood also mixes with her life-current! I tell you this, young master; I, Zelna Mayne's grandmother!"

Dan Dunn uttered a sharp ejaculation and leaped forward to her side; but it was only to snatch the gay kerchief from her head, laying bare to his keen gaze her right ear!

CHAPTER XXII.

A SHADOW ON THE TRAIL.

WITH a low cry of mingled anger and fright the woman shrunk back, one yellow hand clutching the haft of a long-bladed, vicious-looking knife, its point threatening the Soft-Hand Detective.

"I beg your pardon, madam, but really I could not help it!" Dan Dunn hurriedly muttered, averting his eyes as he shook the 'kerchief at arm's-length for a moment, then stamped his foot sharply on the carpet. "It was a venomous spider—ugh!" with a real or admirably counterfeited shiver. "I have such a horror of the disgusting creatures that I really could not help acting so rudely. I thought it was biting you."

Plausible though the speech was, it failed to appease the strange woman, who still menaced him with her knife as she gratingly uttered:

"I'd kill you for that, young master, if I didn't hope you would make good your father's vow—if I thought you couldn't help me to my revenge on Nelson Mayne!"

"I certainly will not pledge my word to that effect without first learning just what cause you may have for wishing revenge," quietly responded the detective, paying no attention to the menacing blade as he held out the head-dress toward its owner.

His bold ruse had succeeded perfectly, so far as laying bare that suspected right ear was concerned, but it left him still in doubt. To all appearance the lobe was perfect, lacking the peculiar birthmark which he hoped to discover in confirmation of his suspicions; yet still he was not satisfied that he had been at error throughout.

He knew what marvels can be produced by a cunning artist in making up the human form divine. He knew that false features can readily be supplied, so perfect as to defeat close exam-

ination. Even yet this *might* be Harlequin Hat, nor were his suspicions lessened by the fact of that jetty hair being false. If not, why did it look so sadly awry when the woman resumed her head-dress?

"Will you take the place your father meant to fill if death had not overtaken him so suddenly, young master, if I prove to you that Nelson Mayne is black to the very core?" eagerly persisted the woman, as she settled her kerchief once more in place.

"Not unless you can furnish me with positive proof," coldly responded the Soft-Hand Detective. "Remember that you are a complete stranger to me. I do not even know your name."

"Annette Mauvais, young master," more calmly spoke the woman, sinking into the seat to which Dan Dunn waved her. "I come from Georgia, where I was born and raised. And it was in Georgia that Nelson Mayne first cast his evil eyes upon us—may the avenging lightning of high heaven sear them this day!" with a flash of her former fire.

"First prove your charges against the gentleman, madam, then vent your curses upon him and his if you see fit," coldly interposed Dan Dunn. "Until you prove him a villain, I must believe him a gentleman, and treat him all the more courteously because of the heavy blow which has so recently fallen upon him. If you cannot agree to this, then I must beg of you to seek other aid than mine in winning your revenge."

"Blind—ever blind!" muttered the woman, shaking her head to and fro until those wonderfully brilliant eyes seemed a dusky streak of fire across her swarthy face. "Love—just such love as led my poor Paula to her eternal ruin!"

Dan Dunn said nothing, though not a word, tone or movement escaped his keen though carefully veiled watch. He was not so certain now that this could be Harlequin Hat, though the general contour of that swarthy face, and as much of her figure as he could see, might have answered for the ex-actress. The size and color of the eyes, too, agreed almost perfectly, though he had never known hers to glitter and glow after this strange fashion.

Again he was recalling the words of Zelna Mayne while trying to explain how she had been lured away from her house on that tragic night. She must have been looking into just such eyes as these!

"I will tell you, young master, just as I told your honored father before his shamefully cruel assassination," abruptly broke forth Annette Mauvais, her wagging head ceasing its motion and her bright eyes steadily fastening upon the pale, grave face of the detective. "And after I have told you all, perhaps you will lend me a helping hand in my long, unequal fight against this—gentleman!"

"I was born and raised in Georgia, young master. A slave, though there is—and was then, though only I dared claim as much—free blood in my veins, for my father was a Cherokee chief, then the freest of all free men! My mother was a negress, and a field hand until long after my birth. Then, when my young mistress took me into the grand house and made me more a companion than a servant, I made life easier for mother. Until—she ran away to the mountains with her chief."

"Twice my father stole down from the hills to lure me away to share life with them, but I as often refused to go. To leave my young mistress as I told him; but I lied. Had she been the only child of the great house, I would have fled without a single pang of regret!"

"The old master died, and young master came into possession. My young mistress married and went away to her husband's plantation. She wished for me, but I did not go with her. Never mind why. I did not go."

"Then the cruel troubles broke out, and young master went for a soldier. You are young, but you must have some idea of what all that meant. It was sore fighting in the field, sorer waiting at home. And then—the blue-coats came marching down to the sea!"

"My Paula was only a girl in years, but she was a woman in all else. She was beautiful as a dream. Not alone in a fond mother's eyes, young master. Others saw and said as much—and Nelson Mayne said even more!"

"Then what could I do, young master? Surely, no more than I tried! I offered my life to save Paula. And that—gentleman!—shot me down and left me for dead before the blazing ruins of what had once been the Great House!"

Annette Mauvais drooped her head and covered her face with her trembling hands. Tears trickled through her fingers, to drop silently in her lap.

Dan Dunn waited in perfect silence. Was this acting? Was it the simple truth? Had he been wrong from the very outset?

Only for a few moments did the woman give way to her grief over the past. She lifted her head, her eyes blazing marvelously, her swarthy face distorted by a forced smile, her voice sounding harsh and mechanical as she resumed her story:

"I recovered, since you see me before you, young master. And when I was able—not until the end had come, and the war was over—I made my feeble way in search of my Paula."

"Don't ask me how, young master. The end is too bitter to go into details. Enough that I accepted any aid that offered. Enough that, long years after, I found this honorable gentleman! Not Paula, though I found her grave. He killed her, just as surely as your old father was murdered by—by my grandchild!"

"You can prove all this, Mrs. Mauvais?" sharply demanded Dan Dunn, his self-control at last breaking down, for he could not affect to misunderstand whom she meant to accuse by that title.

"If I can, will you swear to avenge me upon the demon who drove my Paula to her grave with a broken heart?" eagerly demanded the woman, with eyes glowing like living coals. "Will you help me repay the foul taunts and insults and cruel shame which they—father and child, one as stony-hearted and pitiless as the other!—showered upon me? Simply because I asked how and why my child—my beautiful Paula!—died!"

"If you can prove all this—but how can you do so? What shape will your evidence assume, Mrs. Mauvais?"

"I have papers, young master," was the subdued reply. "Not with me to-night. I never carry them about with me now, since Nelson Mayne had me arrested for being crazy, and cast me into a living hell! But I have them, young master, and I'll show them to you, because I feel that even if you go back on your dead father's word, you will not wrong me to save the wicked from meeting the fit reward of their crimes."

"Where and when can I see these papers, madam?"

Annette Mauvais crossed over to the open desk and in small, crabbed characters wrote her name on a slip of paper. Under this she gave a number and the name of a street, her fingers trembling so that the paper rattled audibly as she handed it to the detective.

In silence he read the few words, his heart throbbing curiously and his eyes dimming for an instant as he recognized the identical address given him by Harlequin Hat on the train, when she bade him call at that house if ever the time should come when he wished to learn aught concerning the past life of Major Nelson Mayne!

As if he found difficulty in deciphering the crabbed writing, Dan Dunn moved closer to the nearest gas-jet, one hand extended as if to guard against a collision with the wall while his eyes were otherwise occupied. A very simple movement, perfectly natural in execution, yet while reading once more the address, one finger was almost imperceptibly communicating with Robert Turnbull!

"You live over the river, then, Mrs. Mauvais?" he asked, glancing up from the paper, folding it and slipping it into his pocket.

"In East St. Louis, young master," was the soft response. "Ask for old Annette, or Indian Ann, if you find any trouble, sir. Everybody knows who that means, and will show you my house. You will come, young master? You will not let your murdered father's pledge die out?"

"I will see you again, most assuredly, Mrs. Mauvais," with a faint smile that went no deeper than the surface.

"And if you come, young master, I will prove to you that your gentleman is no better than a jail-bird!" flashed the woman, turning to the door. "I'll show you that!"

She stopped short in her hot speech, closing her lips with firmness, as though she feared to say too much before she had secured a decided pledge from the detective.

Dan Dunn made no effort to detain her, opening the door and bowing her out in silence. And as Annette Mauvais vanished down the long flight of stairs, the Soft-Hand Detective stepped back into his room, swiftly turning off the gas, then silently raising a window facing on the street.

By this time it was fairly night, and there was not sufficient light from below or above to betray his espial, though he could recognize that dark, cloaked figure as Annette Mauvais left the building and moved rapidly down the street.

And a grim smile curled his lips as he also caught a glimpse of Robert Turnbull in cautious pursuit.

"A shadow on your trail, my lady!" he grimly laughed, as he drew in his head and closed the window. "Be you Indian, negress, Harlequin Hat, or the foul fiend himself, Robert will track you to your den! And I'm open to lay long odds that it will not be on the east side of the river, either!"

But this exultation was short-lived, and as he lit the gas once more, Dan Dunn looked very grave and troubled in mind.

Seated in a chair, with his eyes fixed upon the spot where his old father had been discovered, cold in death, Dan Dunn gave himself up to sober reflection.

The better part of a week had crept by, and as yet he had not hit upon a single clew to the

assassin or assassins, unless this peculiar visit just ended might be termed one. Was it?

One moment he fancied it would turn out a most valuable clew, the next his haunting doubts returned with redoubled force. For now he could understand what had so sorely perplexed him for many weeks prior to the murder of his father; now he held the key which solved those moody speeches, those troubled looks and gloomy hours with which Lapier Tostivan suffered and made his son suffer.

"But it is a lie! Zelna's blood is as pure and unmixed as my own! A lie, false as Satan himself ever concocted!" Dan Dunn grated, hotly.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE OLD ROOKERY.

It is easy for the tongue to shape words on occasion, but the mind is not so surely commanded. Dan Dunn was terribly in earnest when he breathed forth those fierce sentences, but before the breath was fairly dry upon his lips, ugly doubts were flocking back to his brain.

Not that he for an instant doubted the perfect innocence of Zelna Mayne, so far as the actual death of Lapier Tostivan was concerned, for just as surely as though he had witnessed the action with his own eyes did he know that the assassin had guided the senseless finger of the murdered man to shape that scarlet accusation; and granting that Zelna Mayne was capable of committing such an atrocious crime, it was impossible that she could thus charge herself with the bloody deed.

But there was another barb flung by the woman who called herself Annette Mauvais, and the more Dan Dunn reflected, the sharper it rankled and the more surely it diffused its corroding poison.

If there was any truth in that fierce taunt of mixed blood, much that had troubled him for a long time could be accounted for. Among other things the sudden opposition which Lapier Tostivan had shown to the contemplated alliance by marriage.

But could this atrocious plot which he had grown to believe was born of Harlequin Hat's vicious longing for revenge on the man who had, in the course of his duty, driven her husband to his death, have been originated so long ago? It was nearly six months before his death that Lapier Tostivan first openly turned against the Mayne family. Had Harlequin Hat even then begun to lay her cunning plans?

"It must be so," doggedly muttered the Soft-Hand Detective, still staring vacantly at the now blank wall. "It was then that I first told father of my dear hopes. It was then that he gave me his first harsh and angry word!"

If there was any truth in the charge now brought forward by the wild-eyed being who gave the name of Annette Mauvais, the simple cause of that sudden change was laid bare. Proud Southerner, with all the traditional scorn for and prejudice against mixed blood, the simple fact that such a charge could be brought against Zelna Mayne was quite sufficient to account for his opposition to the match.

"A lie—a foul and malicious lie!" grated the detective, moved more strongly, to outward seeming, than he had been even by the death of his honored parent. "Only Harlequin Hat could have thought of such a dastardly stroke as this! Only Harlequin Hat—only a woman, and a woman of her unique caliber!"

It was thinking in a circle. In vain did he try to get his brain to carry the trail outside of that narrow limit; from Zelna to the mixed-blood, from Annette to Harlequin Hat; always with the same beginning and the same ending, always denying the possibility of a single drop of impure blood flowing in the veins of his loved one, yet always ending with a search for positive facts that his heart was right.

The very eagerness with which he sprang from his chair to answer the tapping at his door, which he instantly recognized as a token that honest Robert Turnbull had returned from his mission, showed how difficult and unpleasant he had found the nut which Indian Ann left for him to crack.

"Well, Robert?" the Soft-Hand Detective eagerly asked, as he opened the door to admit his "right hand," as he was fond of terming the wiry little shadow. "You ran the game to earth?"

"As you signaled for me to do, sir," was the quiet response.

"On this side of the Big Muddy, Robert, or I've lost a bet made by my right hand against my left," grimly smiled the detective, looking and acting far more like his old self than at any time since the coming of Annette Mauvais with her fierce appeal for aid in her revenge.

"On this side, sir," nodded Turnbull, with grave face and an anxious gleam in his dark eyes as they rested upon the face of his friend and employer. "At an ugly, ill-favored den on South—th street. I've heard of the house before, though of late years it has been quiet enough. The police know it best by the title of the Old Rookery."

"I have heard something about it, I believe," nodded Dan Dunn, the smile vanishing from his

face, leaving it hard to read, even by one who loved and knew him so well as Robert Turnbull. "I have never seen the building, to my knowledge, but no doubt it is worthy the reputation it has gained in the past. And you say you shadowed the game there?"

Robert Turnbull bowed assent.

"I never let her slip from under my eyes after I saw her come out of your office. I followed her to the Old Rookery. I saw her enter the building, and waited to make sure she was not just pausing there before going further. Then, as I had no further instructions from you, sir, I took the number and hastened back for a fresh start."

"You have done your share, Robert," nodded Dan Dunn, with a kindly smile. "I wanted to know just where I could put a hand on that old hag in case I should want her for aught. I will not want anything further to-night, old fellow, but you want a good sound sleep. Shake, and then hunt your bed as quickly as you please, Robert."

Turnbull returned that cordial grasp of the hand, but there was an uneasy, wistful light in his eyes which Dan Dunn could hardly have avoided noticing, even had not the faithful fellow explained it by:

"You will not venture down yonder all alone, Mr. Dunn? If you want any more work done, I'll gladly take it in hand. Or—if you have to take a run that way, let me go with you?"

"I wouldn't ask a better man at my shoulder, Robert," with a return of that bright, kindly smile which made the little shadow ever ready to lay down his life in defense of such a master. "And if ever I have cause to raid the Old Rookery and its surroundings, be sure you will be my first choice. But I'm not going to do anything of the sort this night. So—sound asleep and untroubled dreams, Bobby, boy!"

Slowly, reluctantly Robert Turnbull accepted his dismissal, pausing at the door to cast a last appealing glance toward the detective. But Dan Dunn was already seated at his desk, seemingly oblivious to his "right hand" and his troubled doubts.

As Turnbull closed the door behind him, Dan Dunn produced from his vest-pocket the slip of paper on which Annette Mauvais had traced her name and address across the river, though the street was the only clew to the last fact.

A faint smile curled his lips as his gaze lifted to a little pigeon-hole, into which one hand slipped, to touch a spring and then uncork a small vial from the tiny recess thus revealed.

Uncorking this vial, the Soft-Hand Detective let fall a single drop of colorless liquid on the paper, deftly covering the street and number with a light stroke of the glass stopper. The acid worked swiftly, and by the time the vial was placed in its hiding-place, the half-line looked as though it had never been written upon.

Taking the same pen and ink used by Indian Ann, Dan Dunn slowly and carefully altered the address, as given him by Turnbull, producing an exact imitation of the wild-eyed woman's peculiar handwriting.

"It may prove labor spent in vain," he muttered, as he viewed his work critically. "It will, if what I suspect be true, Harlequin! But there is a bare chance that the woman may be just what she describes herself, and I can't afford to take any extra chances in the game I am playing. And until the paper has time to turn yellow under the acid, there is nothing here to show the hag that my work is not simply a strange error of her own hand."

The Soft-Hand Detective placed the bit of paper in his pocket, then opened a fresh box of cartridges, emptying the cylinders of two good revolvers to refill them, carefully pressing each shell home, and making sure the action was in perfect order.

When satisfied of this point, he turned the gas jets low, closing and locking the door after him as he left the room to descend to the street, bound on a mission which he felt reasonably sure would prove a more than ordinarily perilous one.

"If my idea is the correct one, anyhow," he mentally uttered as he strode briskly down the street. "I want another look at that littleright ear of yours, Annette Mauvais, as you give your name; Harlequin Hat, as I hope to prove you before this night grows old!"

The more he thought of it, the more firmly he believed that his first suspicions were well-founded. Even the apparent perfect outline of that swarthy-skinned ear could not long shake his belief. It was not impossible to hide that significant birth-mark by an adroit use of *papier-maché*.

And then—if his wild-eyed visitor should be proven none other than Harlequin Hat, there could no longer be a doubt as to the utter falsity of those black slurs against Zelma Mayne and her blood!

It was this thought that, more than aught else, sent Dan Dunn forth on his mission to the Old Rookery that night, alone and depending on his own arms and clear wits for immunity. If he had not retained a lingering shade of

doubt, he would have taken at least Robert Turnbull along with him.

If the mixed-blood should prove to be precisely what she claimed, then it would be wisest, perhaps, not to have even such friendly ears near enough to catch her venomous denunciations of Nelson Mayne and his daughter.

The Soft-Hand Detective found no particular difficulty in reaching the dingy structure known in police circles as "The Old Rookery," thanks to the street and number secured for him by Turnbull.

It was a lonely part of the town, and the narrow street seemed entirely deserted as Dan Dunn turned into it to pass slowly by the Old Rookery. This was a large building, as compared with its neighbors, and an outward examination by the dim lights, widely scattered through this disreputable section, afforded scant idea as to what it might have been originally. It was not a tenement-house, nor did it altogether answer the description of a business building. It was of two stories, built of wood, its front a square blank, save for the one door and a scant supply of windows.

There were no signs of life about the place, but Dan Dunn rapped sharply at the door, his left hand resting on a pistol-butt, ready to use powder and lead on the instant, if necessary.

He rapped a second time, and then heard heavy, shuffling footsteps approaching beyond the barrier. There was a fumbling with locks and a subdued rattling as of chains, then the door opened sufficiently to permit a black, woolly head to protrude with:

"Who's dar? What's wantin', boss?"

There was a more respectful intonation as the owner of that head saw the tall, well-dressed figure on the low steps, and as if unconsciously the door was drawn further inwards, an opening of which Dan Dunn immediately availed himself.

Without seeming to be anxious for an entrance, he deftly kept the door swinging inward until he could step across the threshold, bringing a bit of paper from his pocket, and affecting to refresh his memory by a glance at the direction written thereon before saying:

"This is the place, as I thought, I wish to see Annette Mauvais, uncle. Will you kindly direct me to that lady?"

His cool assurance seemed to take the dusky guardian—a stout, frosty-headed negro, black as ebony—by storm. He stammered something inarticulately, but mechanically closed the hall door and shot a bolt.

"The lady gave me her address, and I promised to call on her in her own interests, uncle," smoothly explained the detective, keenly yet without apparent purpose scanning that dusky face and bowed figure. "She is at home, of course?"

"Yes, sah—dis way, sah," stammered the negro, shambling clumsily along the narrow hall to a side door, which he flung open and was stepping aside when Dan Dunn smilingly rested a hand upon his shoulder and sent him in advance, saying:

"I'll just give you my card as a token, uncle, for Mrs. Mauvais hardly expected me to call so soon, and might refuse to recognize—"

He turned quickly toward the door, to behold Indian Ann in person!

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY.

THE recognition, however, did not seem to be mutual, for the woman sharply addressed the negro with:

"Who is it, honey? Why you let in anybody without first asking me, Unc' Tandy?"

Dan Dunn faced the dim light more clearly, pushing back the brim of his soft hat, smiling blandly as he answered for the negro:

"The fault, if any, belongs to me, Mrs. Mauvais. I was so impatient to speak further with you, on a certain matter which you surely have not so soon forgotten, that I could not wait for another day."

As she caught a fair sight of his face, the woman shrank back, her swarthy face seeming to grow pale as her peculiar eyes flashed the more vividly. If she was playing a part, she needed no further rehearsal to make her letter-perfect in her present rôle.

"I didn't—how did you find me?" she panted, one hand pressed to her side, as though to still the startled throbbings of her heart.

Dan Dunn assumed an air of mild amazement at this question, and took from his pocket the slip of paper given him by the woman.

"By means of this, Mrs. Mauvais," he said, softly, as though fearful of increasing her evident fright. "Surely you have not so soon forgotten giving me your address?"

"I did—I didn't—let me see that paper!" flashed the woman, as she came forward, her yellow hand trembling visibly as she almost snatched the paper from the hand of the detective, holding it up the better to see by the dim light: only a candle, resting on a side bracket not far from the door.

Her face took on a look of bewilderment as she eagerly scanned the lines on the paper.

Even with that cunning evidence before her eyes she seemed to doubt.

"It never—it is my writing, but I'll swear I gave you an address in East St. Louis!" she muttered, hoarsely.

Dan Dunn made no open denial, but there came into his face a look of pity that was even more eloquent than words. Mrs. Mauvais detected this, and with an almost vicious motion, tore the slip of paper in two, crumpling up the pieces before flinging them from her.

"I do not understand it at all!" she flashed.

"Then why make the effort, madam?" blandly uttered Dan Dunn, dropping his hat on the little stand which occupied the rear of the square room. "Why not pass it over as an unaccountable mistake, and save any further trouble? I can give you my decision on the—"

A swift gesture cut his speech short, and the woman sharply said:

"You can go, husband. Wait where my voice can reach you, but do not enter unless I call you."

Without a word the negro obeyed, giving Annette a wide berth as he passed around her in order to gain the door. This he drew to after him, but keenly as he listened, Dan Dunn could hear no sound of key or fastening than the simply latch itself.

Annette took the candle from its bracket, placing it on the little stand of which mention has already been made. Then she spoke again, her voice slightly unsteady, as though she was not yet reconciled to this unexpected meeting:

"You have followed me here to give me your promise of aid in my unequal fight against Nelson Mayne and my unnatural grandchild, master? You are ready to take up the work laid down by your honored father?"

"And you, madam, are ready to show me the proofs you spoke of while at my office?"

The woman sharply flung out one hand as she ejaculated:

"How can I? I have them not with me. They are safe—safe and sound, young master, but not here! I told you—I said you must call on me at my home across the river if you wished to see them!"

"You said as much, I admit, but when I looked more carefully at the written address—you write a very peculiar hand, by the way."

"I was born and reared in slavery, young master," meekly.

"That was your misfortune, not your crime, Mrs. Mauvais. But as I started to say, when I saw this given as your address, I fancied that you might have made a similar mistake about the documents."

"I made no mistake. It is witchcraft!" piously crossing herself.

Dan Dunn seemed perplexed for a brief space, though taking care to keep a close if covert watch on this woman with the strange eyes. More than ever he believed that his first suspicions were founded on fact.

That disguising cloak was absent, now, and though dressed far more poorly than he had ever known Harlequin Hat, save during the one visit he had made to her while in State's Prison before being pardoned out, this figure might easily have passed for that of the ex-actress, with a few thickens about her lithe waist, and such simple changes as she would find easy enough to effect after her stage training.

If his suspicions were true, Dan Dunn knew that he was standing over a smoldering volcano, liable to be cast into a desperate struggle for dear life at any moment. But he had counted the risk, and was prepared to meet it after his own cool fashion.

He resolved to unmask Harlequin Hat before they parted company that night, let the consequences be what they might.

"There is one way out of the tangle, Mrs. Mauvais," he at length observed, meeting that burning gaze frankly, a half-smile playing across his face for an instant. "You declare that Major Mayne has bitterly wronged you?"

"He shot me. He stole away my daughter. He sent her to the grave with a broken heart. He threatened to kill me if I ever bothered him again, after I found him out so many weary years later. He swore I was crazy, and his money sent me to an insane asylum."

Coldly, steadily, without the slightest trace of emotion in her voice or face, Mrs. Mauvais framed this terrible indictment. But in her vividly glittering eyes Dan Dunn could read the powerful passions which lay back of that assumed calmness.

"If Major Mayne has been guilty of all this, you are not afraid to confront him with your accusations?"

"He would kill me!" muttered the woman, shrinking visibly.

"Not if you went there under my protection," was the swift retort. "I swear that no harm shall befall you while engaged in exposing the man who stole away your daughter. You say you long to be revenged upon him for all your wrongs and sufferings. Then why not accept my offer?"

Still the woman shook her head, gloomily muttering the same refrain.

"That will not do, Annette," coldly commented Dan Dunn. "If you could prove all you say, and if Nelson Mayne has really wronged you as bitterly as you try to make out, you would not fear to face him down, as long as I swear that you shall have all the protection you deserve."

"You have some reason which you are holding back. Can it be that, after all, your love is stronger than your revenge? Do you love this man who stole away your Paula?"

"I hate him!" flashed the woman, harshly.

"Then is it love or consideration for your grandchild?"

"She laughed me to scorn when I called her my Paula's child! She, too, is altogether evil! She—the one who killed your poor old father lest he tell you what he had discovered! For fear you should ever learn that the blood of the despised negro and the Indian mingled in her dainty veins! Love her? I? Paula's mother?" laughed Annette, her usually sweet, musical voice grown harsh and discordant.

Dan Dunn waited until the tempest subsided, then quietly spoke:

"Shall I tell you why I asked this last question, Mrs. Mauvais? Shall I explain what led me to believe that, despite your very emphatic denial, I deemed it barely possible that the daughter of your lost Paula might still have a hold on your affections?"

"I hate her!" flashed the woman, but visibly shrinking back, seemingly frightened by the peculiar smile which played about that mouth.

"So you said before, Mrs. Mauvais, but despite all this, there is one little fact which I can hardly reconcile with your words. And as we can't spend the precious moments in examining the documents which I fully counted on finding here this evening, why not clear up the minor points, rather than wholly waste my venture?"

"Those are very remarkable eyes of yours, Annette," the smile deepening upon his face. "They are brighter than diamonds of the first water, and though undeniably beautiful as rare, I hardly wonder that people were inclined to think you crazy. Truly wonderful eyes, Mrs. Mauvais, and hardly to be matched for luster and brilliancy in all St. Louis, one would think. Yet—a woman with a pair of eyes marvelously like those you sport in your head, called on Zelna Mayne the very night Lapier Tostivan was murdered! Was it you, *Harlequin Hat*?"

"I don't—what do you mean, sir?" panted the woman.

"To have a closer look at that precious right ear of yours, my daring actress!" cried Dan Dunn, starting forward as he spoke, his own eyes fairly flaming with triumph at his contemplated victory:

But the woman sprung back of the little stand, giving a shrill laugh of scorn and triumph as the floor opened beneath her feet!

CHAPTER XXV.

CAUGHT IN THE DEATH-TRAP.

LAUGHING shrilly, mockingly, her remarkable eyes resembling balls of living fire more than ever now that the too-confident detective was fairly in the meshes, Annette Mauvais escaped his grasp, and left her identity still a puzzle. As by magic the floor seemed to open beneath her feet, and still grasping the little stand with her hands, taking the one candle with her, the wild-eyed woman shot out of his reach.

Dan Dunn's first and natural thought was that the cunning trap was being sprung to catch him, and having no time in which to discover its extent or exact nature, he fiercely resolved to secure his revenge even in defeat.

Instead of recoiling, he made a swift leap directly at the owner of those strange eyes, his fingers curved in readiness to clutch throat or arm, or aught by which he could insure her sharing whatever doom had been planned for him.

Only to be worse than foiled!

The woman escaped his clutches, thanks to the rapidity with which the machinery performed its calculated duty. The returning trap was not only strong enough to defy the weight and impetus of the detective, but had sufficient power to fling him onward, to strike the wall with his head and shoulders.

Dan Dunn, breathless, half-stunned, rose from the floor to which he rebounded, revolver in hand, and hot defiance upon his lips. To stop stock-still for an instant in utter darkness.

The one lighted candle had accompanied Annette Mauvais in her theatrical flight to the lower regions, and now the entrapped detective failed to find even the faintest ray of light in any direction to illumine the utter darkness, and give him an idea as to which quarter his enemies were most likely to attack him from.

Silently, slowly, not knowing what moment he might spring a deadly trap for his own destruction, Dan Dunn backed until he touched the wall. And here, each hand armed with a cocked revolver, he waited and listened for some signs of his enemies.

His wits were keen, his brain worked easily enough now. For the first few seconds he had naturally believed that the woman had made an error in springing the trap, pressed so close as she had been, and that she had fallen into it in

place of her intended victim. But he thought so no longer.

"This is the trap, and I'm right in the middle of it!" he grimly reflected while waiting and trying to watch for the coming of his enemies, or some signs by which he could guess at the fate destined for him. "Will it hold me, think, *Harlequin*? Will my vendetta come to an end in this pit of midnight, before I have even decided where I ought to deal my first stroke of vengeance?"

He made no attempt to answer his own questions, for just as they flashed across his brain he caught a soft, peculiar sound, but coming from whence, or caused by what, he could not even guess.

There was a faint, barely audible hissing sound, something like that which several species of our non-venomous snakes will make when persistently tormented by a human being. So faint that only ears of the first class, and those while strained to unusual vigilance, could have detected the sound at all. And it had hardly begun before it came to an end.

"Enough to show that the cunning devils are already at work!" the Soft-Hand Detective mentally decided. "But how? What shape will their blows take? If only they give me a definite sign!" and he gripped his trusty weapons still more firmly.

By this time Dan Dunn had carefully worked out his precise position. Directly in front of him was the door by means of which he had entered the room. Of course that was securely fastened, but it seemed the most plausible mode of escape, after all. Unless—

He sunk silently to his knees, putting up one of his pistols to give him the unimpeded use of a hand. He slowly moved forward until he believed his hand must be on the carpet at about the point where the trap must have opened to admit the descent of that woman. And then he felt of the floor, inch by inch, with a faint hope that he might hit upon the spring by which the bit of mechanism was put in operation.

If *Harlequin Hat*—as he more surely felt the wild-eyed impostor must be—had escaped from the room in safety, why might he not put the trap to even better use?

If found! That was the puzzle! For though he soon discovered where the rag-carpet was cut, and even felt the neat joints made by the trap flooring itself, that was all. He failed to detect any signs of a spring upon which the woman could have pressed, and was about to decide that she must have been aided by a confederate underground, when a whiff of nauseous odor came circling to his nostrils, driving him back and causing him to spring erect; only to gasp and choke violently.

With his face so close to the floor while pursuing his search for the secret spring in the dark, Dan Dunn had not noticed how rapidly the close room was filling with this suffocating matter. But as he raised his head, he seemed to plunge it into a solid mass of—Merciful heavens! those fiends were pouring illuminating gas into the room!

That startling discovery seemed to cool the brain and restore the momentarily-shaken wits to their old keenness.

He knew that the end could not long be delayed if the foul vapor was kept pouring into the room with the same force as it must have been doing while he was searching for some method of springing the trap. He knew that what he did must be quickly accomplished, and his thoughts instinctively turned toward the door through which he had entered this death trap.

Even with that noxious fluid already causing his lungs to labor and his brain to throb painfully, the Soft-Hand Detective kept all his wits about him, and instead of wildly rushing across the room in his haste to test the one avenue of exit, he slipped silently along the wall, touching it with his back all the time, revolver in hand, his other member fully extended and sliding over the smooth surface to warn him of a possible obstruction, friendly or otherwise.

In this manner he soon turned the corner and after the same fashion made his way to the door without other discovery. Not a sound now broke the deathlike silence. It was almost as though his enemies deemed him already dead and in his grave, and were content to let him rest undisturbed until the last trump should sound!

Doubtless the pressure of gas upon his lungs and brain had much to do with such fantastic fancies, but Dan Dunn was still cool enough to pause for thought as his hand closed upon the knob, to find that it was useless, so far as opening the door was concerned.

In his hand he held the means by which the lock could surely be shattered, but what would be the effect on the gas-filled room? Would the shot be followed by an explosion? If so, he knew well enough what must be the result to himself.

He paused just long enough to test the air by taking a long, deep breath. It was desperately conceived and resolutely carried out, but the experiment well-nigh proved a fatal one!

The doomed detective staggered and would have fallen to the floor in a dizzy, suffocating

heap, only for his convulsive grip on the door-knob. As it was he swung around, striking his face against the casing with force sufficient to set his nose to bleeding freely.

Whether it was this relief to the surcharged vessels of his brain or simply the physical shock, is not so easy to determine. Enough that Dan Dunn was steadied sufficiently to put his former idea into prompt execution.

What if it should result in an explosion? Death surely must ensue if he failed to force a way out of that horrible trap, and one sudden and sharp was preferable to being suffocated like a cur!

Even in his partially-dazed condition, the Soft-Hand Detective was cool and collected enough to make sure his pistol was directed at the weakest portion of the lock before he pulled trigger; cool enough to crouch low down to the floor to be as free as possible from the effects should the gas indeed catch fire from his shot.

He pulled the trigger, and gave a choking cry of joy as no explosion of gas followed! A trembling touch told him that the shot had not been entirely wasted. The casing of cast-iron was broken, and another such impact must surely complete the work!

It was discharged, and yet another and another, to make assurance doubly sure. And the doomed detective gave another hoarse, suffocating cry as he tore the shattered lock from its place, leaving only the knob and its bar connecting it with its fellow on the outside. Now—

The door resisted his fierce jerk. It did not even shake. So far as motion was concerned, it might as well have been a portion of the solid wall!

Silently as the negro, real or counterfeit, had worked, he had taken every precaution against an escape through this avenue.

As he began to realize this fact, Dan Dunn lost the characteristic coolness and unshaken nerve with which he had acted from the first springing of the death-trap.

Small wonder that he should, with that deadly fluid filling his lungs until his internal organs seemed bathed in liquid fire, and his skull surrounded by a band of spike-studded steel, gradually but horribly closing tighter and tighter, each turn of the screw threatening to crush the bones into needle-splinters to shoot through and through the quivering brain!

The nearly-emptied revolver dropped from his hand to the floor. He drew back a couple of paces, then shot forward with all his failing power, trying to burst down the barrier with his powerful shoulders.

Only to be hurled back by his own force, reeling, staggering, gasping, suffocating—was it dying?

A hoarse, choking cry came from his parched and bleeding lips as the floor beneath his benumbed feet seemed to give way, to open with a dull, rumbling roar, to let him fall—

To fall, but no further than the carpeted floor itself.

Here the air was purer, less impregnated by that noxious fluid, and the Soft-Hand Detective drew in long gulps of it, the difference making it seem almost like the purest of air in his nearly suffocated condition.

With the desperation of a truly brave man, who will yield only when the last frail hope is extinguished, Dan Dunn collected his wandering senses, and then produced from an inner pocket a small but powerful lantern, filled with a chemical preparation by which a strong light could be obtained for a short space without the use of oil or striking a match. He touched the spring and removed the slide, casting the reflection around him, at the door, over the walls, to the ceiling, and even across the floor.

He could discover nothing. There was nothing to tell him at what point that deadly fluid was being poured into his living tomb. There seemed no other means of leaving that square apartment save by way of the door, or through the hidden trap.

He shouted aloud at the top of his lungs, but the dull, flat echo told him that this was labor spent in vain. The walls were perfectly deadened, and his wildest appeals for help could not possibly reach any friendly ear on the street, however much they might delight his ruthless entrappers!

And the trap—he crawled painfully toward it, his face pressing against the coarse carpet as he advanced, to avoid as much as possible the inhalation of gas. His brain was madly whirling. The room was swaying up and down, back and forth, as though tossed upon a heavy sea. With a retching groan, he ceased his efforts to advance, trying to fasten his fingers into the harsh carpet, to save himself from being tossed from—was it a raft? Was that the sea—an ocean of mountain waves, each of them tipped with flames?

Were those sea-serpents? God of mercy! Look!

The ocean of fire was alive with the hideous, slimy reptiles, all of them darting toward him, all of them bearing human heads, with eyes that shone and flashed far more vividly than those other flames! And each head was fronted by the satanically beautiful face of *Harlequin Hat*!

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DOOM OF THE WATCH-DOG.

WITH a seriously-troubled air Robert Turnbull passed from the office of the Soft-Hand Detective and slowly made his way to the street.

Although he could not persist in his advice after the manner in which Dan Dunn repulsed him, kindly, yet so positively, he had not the slightest intention of accepting that smiling advice, much as he might have needed sleep and rest if his mind had been less troubled.

"He means to go to the Old Rookery, or he'd have said not in so many words," muttered the watch-dog, to himself as he paused on the opposite side of the street, where the shadows lay deepest. "Why wouldn't he let me do the work in hand? Because it is too dangerous!"

The echo of steps along the flagged walk caused him to shrink still deeper into the passage, where he stood silent and motionless until the man passed him by without suspicion. He never removed his eyes from the building opposite, resolved to follow the man whom he loved above his own life, to warn him of possible danger or to share his fate should his worst suspicions prove founded on fact.

He was more familiar with St. Louis than was Dan Dunn, having been born and bred in that city. He knew that, despite its comparative depopulation, the vicinity of the Old Rookery was one of the worst, wickedest, most dangerous portions of the Mound City for a well-dressed stranger to venture into.

He knew absolutely nothing of the person who had called upon his chief that evening. He could not even make a guess at her purpose. All he did know that Dan Dunn had signaled him to shadow the person who would shortly emerge from his office, and never leave the trail until that person was safely run to earth.

"At the Old Rookery!" he frowned, uneasily, as he waited and watched. "A woman by dress, but it covered a masculine stride, or I'm way off in my guess! And Dan Dunn means to pay her or him a visit this very night in that den of infamy! And so do I!"

With dogged decision came the concluding sentence, for just then the little watch-dog saw his master leave the building opposite and pass rapidly down the street.

To all seeming the Soft-Hand Detective never had a suspicion that he was being shadowed, but even if he had, it is not so sure that he could have confirmed that suspicion, so far as Robert Turnbull was concerned. Though not once losing sight of his friend and master, the wiry little spy kept himself out of sight, aided in this by a firm conviction where that chase must terminate.

And when Dan Dunn rapped at the door of the dingy, disreputable-looking building, Robert Turnbull was eagerly watching his motions from a gloomy nook across the street, a revolver in his hand and every nerve intensely strung, ready to instantly take a hand in the game should his suspicions of "a plant" prove correct.

He saw the door open, and even caught the words which fell from the lips of the counterfeit negro. He heard Dan Dunn respond, and then press into the house. He started forward impulsively, as though bent on bearing his master company, even against his will, but paused again.

"It wouldn't do," he muttered gloomily. "I could face knives or bullets, but not such a cold, steady stare as his eyes would give me for crowding in. And then—I warned him! He's got his eyes open. He can stand off the gang until I get sound of it."

With these reflections Robert Turnbull fell back to his former covert, every sense on the alert, ready for prompt action the moment he should catch a suspicious sound from that ill-omened structure.

In his anxiety for the welfare of the man whom he well-nigh worshiped, time dragged on leaden heels to the watchdog in ambush, though this very delay helped to still his vague suspicions of impending evil to the Soft-Hand Detective.

"Surely the racket would have opened before this, if there is any such game in view as I feared?" Turnbull half-asserted, half-asked himself. "They couldn't have trapped him so suddenly that no sound was made. Dan Dunn isn't built that way!"

Yet he never moved from his covert, never took his gaze from that dingy door, resolved to wait until the passage of time would surely indicate something wrong, then fall to work.

"I'll raid the rookery too quick!" he flashed, his teeth clicking viciously at the bare thought. "But there'll come some sound to let me know how—Ha!"

He saw the door on which his anxious watch was set, swing silently open to permit a tall, athletic figure to pass through, and from the garb, the slouch-hat, the general make-up, he believed he recognized Dan Dunn in person!

And if he had entertained any doubts as to that, they would surely have been dispelled by the clear, mellow notes which floated to his ears as the man turned toward some one inside the door, saying:

"Remember, Annette! I will expect you at my office at the hour agreed upon. Until then—good-by!"

As he uttered the last word, the man drew his coat-collar closely up around his neck as though he felt the chilliness of the night-air, damp in that low-lying region, and leaving the low steps before the door, turned as if to return up-town.

So perfect was the counterfeit that Robert Turnbull never once suspected the truth. He left his covert and moved along through the shadows opposite the decoy, whom he firmly believed was his master, debating in his mind whether or no it would be advisable to make his presence known to the Soft-Hand Sport, or follow him in silence until he was safely in a more reputable portion of the city.

Robert never answered his questions, for without the slightest warning, several dark figures suddenly rose up from the alley-mouth by which he was just passing, and before he could suspect his peril, a vicious stroke on the head from a bludgeon knocked the watch-dog forward upon his face. And before he could have made a move toward regaining his footing, supposing that stroke had not entirely disabled him, the thugs pounced upon him with silent ferocity, gripping his hands and feet, while one pair of hands closed tightly about his throat.

"No need o' that, pard," coarsely laughed one of the evil gang as he noticed this last-named action. "I give him one, an' you'd orter know what that means!"

"All the same, I don't hanker fer no durn' yelpin', cully!" grimly grated the self-appointed throtter. "I ain't lost no cops, I hain't!"

"And only a lost cop would stray into this section after dark," laughed the decoy, who turned and dashed across the street at the first sound of the trap springing. "Let up, man!" sharply tapping the garroter with one foot as the easiest introduction.

"Let up goes, boss!" but with a surly disgust in his voice as he added: "The durn' critter ain't dead, fer all Curly brags o' his power o' hit-tin'!"

"I'll go bail he hain't got a hull bone in his cabeza!" sharply retorted the man named, in a curiously snuff, as though forced to speak through a partially closed passage.

"Straw bail, Moran," laughed the decoy, as he knelt beside the luckless detective and deftly felt of his skull, shaking the drops of warm blood from his hand as he rose to his feet. "The fellow must have a double-plated skull, for he's sound as I am this minute!"

"Shell I stiffen him, boss?" quickly asked the garroter, flashing forth an ugly knife and feeling for the best place to plant his steel.

There was a slight hesitation on the part of the decoy, who appeared to be looked up to by the thugs as their chief, for the present, at least. And if Robert Turnbull was indeed alive, his lease was hardly worth a bid just then, for as though taking permission for granted, the thug lifted his vicious weapon for a death-stroke.

"Don't strike, cully," the decoy uttered, just in time to check the impending blow. "After all, what matter, so long as we've got the head-devil? This whiffet can't harm us, now!"

"He kin show the cops—"

"Not a thing to harm us, after the day dawns," was the sharper interruption. "Truss him up and gag his jaws. Tote him over yonder to the ruins, and I'll go bail he'll work us no harm after he gets loose—if he ever does get free!"

A hard, meaning laugh followed this speech, and all save the thug with the knife joined in it. He was silent. If he disapproved of such an action, he was wise enough not to thrust his opinion too offensively before this well-dressed autocrat of the slums.

Robert Turnbull was bound hand and feet. A stout gag was thrust between his jaws and firmly bound behind his neck. Then the thugs roughly picked him up and made their way to some little distance from the spot, finally tossing their victim into the half-filled cellar of a recently burned house, laughing coarsely as they heard him splash in the foul water at the bottom of the pit.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE LAST OF THE OLD ROOKERY.

"STRUCK water, by the sound!" grimly laughed the decoy, leaning over the crumbling edge and striving to pierce the gloom below with his keen eyes. "How far down do you reckon the damp extends?"

"From a foot to half a dozen, boss."

"So much the worse for Mister Man, for if sound don't lie, he's gone to bed where it's rather more than less!"

"Better let me make plum' sure, boss!"

"Leave that for the cops, my ready worker," was the careless response. "If anything should happen to the fellow, and the police should kick up a bobbery over it, I can make oath he was plenty alive when he parted from our company. And as for the rest—"

Doubtless the thugs heard the full termination of that mocking speech, but Robert Turnbull did not, though all that has been recorded above he did hear, with sufficient distinctness to swear to.

Despite the vicious force with which the thug struck with his heavy club, calculating to kill or stun, with a slight preference for the former, Robert Turnbull could hardly be said to have lost his full consciousness at any part of the time from assault to being tossed into the dark pit of slime and stagnant water at the bottom of the ruins.

The terrific shock temporarily paralyzed his physical powers, while leaving his mental faculties almost undisturbed; a curious but not wholly unprecedented fact.

It was fortunate for himself that such was the case, for even at his worst extremity the faithful fellow had thought only for Dan Dunn, and would surely have shouted aloud a warning to the decoy, believing him to be the Soft-Hand Detective, had he been able to control his vocal chords.

Again he would have betrayed himself had he been able, in his surprise and horror at recognizing how completely he had been deceived, when the decoy bent over him to rudely feel of his lacerated scalp, ending with declaring his skull in sound condition. For now he realized how adroitly he had been deceived and led into a death-trap himself.

Shortly after this—while the bloodthirsty thug was bent on effectually covering up their dastardly work by the use of cold steel—Robert Turnbull felt his powers of speech coming back to him, but he made no effort to test the recovered faculty just then.

There was more than his own life at stake. His friend and master had almost surely been drawn into the meshes of his bitterest enemies, and only he could possibly warn the police or set true men to work at effecting his rescue.

It was this reflection that lent Robert Turnbull strength of mind and firmness of will sufficient to carry him through all that followed. And it was this almost fierce resolve to save his master that enabled him to hide all signs of life and reason while he was being lugged to the ruins and tossed over the bank to fall into that loathsome pit, where death through suffocation seemed almost inevitable.

He struck where the water was deep enough to preserve him from bodily injury, though the force exerted sent him forward a little as he sunk, his head and shoulders resting on a tiny mud-island amid the gloom. And it was from this that he caught the words uttered by his enemies on the bank above.

He noted each word and tried to photograph each voice indelibly upon his memory, the surer to avenge both himself and his loved master in the future, even while he knew that he was slowly, surely slipping from the island through the slimy water. Yet his nerve was such that he made no attempt to stay his progress, lest it awaken the suspicions of the thugs and bring them down to make perfectly sure work of it.

Slowly, surely, inch by inch he was drawn nearer to death. The cold water was already up to his throat, and a few inches more must surely end in death or a desperate struggle for life which could not help but startle those pitiless ruffians on the bank above. Further down into the dark slime, until his lips were bathed in the foul fluid! Down, until the last effort toward filling his lungs to their utmost extent resulted in drawing a small quantity of water into his nostrils: Then he doggedly began his last good fight.

He held his breath as long as possible, his head slowly disappearing beneath the sluggish slime. When his lungs seemed on the point of bursting, he relieved himself a little by partially expelling his breath, still doggedly refusing to attempt to return to the surface lest he ruin the last frail chance of rescuing Dan Dunn.

It was only when mortal lungs could resist no longer that the faithful little fellow drove his bound feet into the muddy bottom and forced his head above the surface, swallowing great drafts of pure air, keeping his face above the slime by a fin-like motion of the hands which were bound behind his back.

There was no sound to tell of discovery, and as he swept his aching eyes along the bank, darker than the sky-line beyond, he failed to detect aught of his enemies. And then, slowly, painfully he managed to make his way to the edge of the foul pool, where he rested only a few seconds before setting to work on the choking gag that held his tongue helpless.

It was hard, almost hopeless work, for the immersion seemed to have drawn those cruel thoughts still tighter than when first adjusted. But Robert Turnbull was working for more than his own comfort, and doggedly persisted, rubbing his face over a pointed rock which had once formed part of the cellar-wall, trying to saw the tough cloth in two, or else tear it sufficiently to catch a portion over the ragged point.

In the end he succeeded, and then turned his attention toward setting his hands at liberty if possible, though the occasional efforts which he had made so far gave him precious little hope. It was this sense of hopelessness in that direction which led him to fight for tongue-freedom first.

He had been too busily engaged to note the gradually growing redness which marked the

clouded sky, and only when the swift, ominous clamor of the first alarm of fire came to his ears did he even dimly begin to realize the terrible truth.

He held his breath to count the regular, methodic strokes which followed the first rapid alarm. He recognized the district by this, and knew that the fire must be the cause of that growing glare which—

A wild, fierce yell broke from his lips as he tried to gain his feet, for now the truth in all its horror broke upon his whirling brain. As surely as though he was standing high enough to feel its scorching heat, he knew that the Old Rookery was going up in flames!

He gave no thought now to his own peril should the thugs hear and rush back to forever silence his tongue. He shouted at the top of his voice, crying "fire!" and "help!" and every other possible method of attracting attention from stray passers-by or the police whom the fire would surely draw toward a common center.

For himself he cared not, but Dan Dunn!

Broader grew that red light. He could hear the distant rumbling of engine-wheels over the rough cobblestones. He could even catch the sound of human voices raised in wild excitement, with an occasional deep-lunged command shouted through a foreman's trumpet.

And then, just as his overstrained voice threatened to fail him altogether, his wild screams for help were heard, and presently a couple of policemen were cautiously descending into that dangerous pit to set the luckless watchdog at liberty once more.

They plied him with eager questions, but never a one did he attempt to answer. His every thought belonged to his idolized master, and he could only beg them to hasten to the rescue of the Soft-Hand Detective.

With the pit dimly lighted up by that red glare, the policemen managed to cut the bonds which held Robert Turnbull powerless to help himself or aid his friend, and then the three men hurriedly clambered up the slippery bank, breaking into a dead run with their faces toward the blazing building. And despite all that he had undergone, Robert Turnbull rapidly distanced his rescuers.

From the very first he had felt no hopes, but his heart seemed to leap into his very throat as he came into full view of the furiously-blazing structure, now hardly more than a skeleton of coals, though the roof-tree had not yet given way and the studdings were still standing.

It was indeed the building into which he saw Dan Dunn vanish a few hours before and from which he firmly believed he had never emerged.

There was a dense crowd of onlookers gathered about the fire, and probably this was fortunate for the half-crazed Turnbull, else, in his fierce sorrow he might have rushed blindly to his own death. As it was he fought fiercely to force a passage through the mass, shouting:

"Save him! A man is inside! Dan Dunn—a thousand dollars to the one who saves him from that hell of flame!"

"An' cheap at twice the money!" laughed a peculiar voice, through a badly broken nose, close beside Turnbull, who gave a savage snarl as he leaped upon the thug, tripping him up and snapping irons on his wrists before Curly Moran could fairly realize his peril!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DELILAH TRIUMPHS OVER SAMSON.

ONLY a few minutes after Dan Dunn sunk with his face to the floor, overcome despite his great strength and pluck by that terribly insidious enemy, against which no man can fight successfully under such conditions, the trap-door was silently, cautiously raised on one edge, barely sufficient for a single eye to sweep the room with a swift glance. It closed, almost immediately, and the being below, with ear lightly pressed to the plank, strained his hearing to the utmost, listening for some sound to betray the consciousness of the man-hunter.

No such sound came, and once more the trap was raised, this time to permit a ray of light from a mask lantern to be cast through the crack, almost instantly falling upon the bare head of the detective, his face resting on the flat lamp, overturned in his final struggle.

"What is it? How is it? Alive or dead?" came a sibilant whisper from the gloom behind and beneath the spy.

"Lying on the floor, but—"

"Out and drag him down!" came that voice, now full of fierce anxiety, as the addition proved: "If he is dead, Alva Parrish, I'll—"

"Not dead, but sleeping, Mrs. Haylock!" laughed the other, as he drew back the hand with which he had viciously plucked a lock of hair from that motionless head. "Another verdant victim from the rural districts! Another sadly ridiculous instance of more wind than wits!"

"Save him, will you!" almost screamed Harlequin Hat, giving the jeering villain a vicious shove that materially aided him in passing through the trap-door.

There was no answer, for reckless though Alva Parrish might be on occasion, he did not care to fall a victim to his own satanic in-

genuity. Even as it was, though there was a draught from the trap which partially cleared its immediate vicinity of the noxious fumes, his lungs were beginning to pain him.

Still, he would not run any unnecessary risks, and crawling alongside the insensible detective, he swiftly searched his body, removing the knife and revolver which he found thereon. And as a ray from his lantern fell upon the other pistol, lying near the door with the shattered lock, he hurriedly crept forward to secure it also.

"The body, man!" fiercely grated Harlequin Hat, her head and shoulders thrust through the opening in the floor. "Do you want him to die so easily?"

"Not breathing now. Leave no proof. Steady him!" curtly responded the counterfeit mestizo, who still wore the garb in which he had so successfully played the rôle of Annette Mauvais.

He shoved the limp, unresisting body of the detective forward, until Harlequin Hat could lock her hands about one shoulder. Then, aided by her eagerly-applied strength, the detective was quickly taken out of that foul atmosphere, into the cool, damp, yet comparatively pure air of that little underground cell.

"Leave the trap open," hurriedly uttered the ex-actress, when the unconscious figure was safely lowered to the earthen floor. "It will help clear away the gas. You shut it off, clean?"

"You was a living witness, dear Hattie," came the swift response.

"Then go signal Dairmid to open the door and get ready for the end. He understands just what to do."

"And you, heart of my heart?" asked Parrish, coming closer to the woman who was now on her knees by the side of the trapped man-hunter, trying to ascertain whether or no their trap had indeed been baited with death, or if there was life lingering for restoration. "Have you only bones to cast to your dog, Harriet?"

"Is this a time for love-making?" flashed the ex-actress, shrinking from his caressing touch, her face paling, her eyes flashing almost with the strange brilliancy which marked his own orbs.

"Is there ever a fitting time in your schedule, Hattie?" a frown corrugating his brows as he gazed intently into her face. "Have you ever given me a different answer? Is it ever to be thus? Am I never to pluck even the slightest flower of my promised—"

"It is promised, but not yet won, remember!" flashed Harlequin Hat, frowning in turn. "Go! obey my orders, or I may even yet withdraw that pledge, Alva Parrish!"

"That would kill me, Harriet, but you would never live to weep over my untimely grave," gravely yet mockingly uttered Parrish. "See! I am your blind, unquestioning slave—until the glorious hour!"

He turned away through the darkness to obey her orders, leaving the woman shivering as if under an ague shock. This strange being was essential to the perfect outcome of her elaborate schemes, yet with the passage of each day she was learning to hate him more fully, to fear him more wholly.

If she only dared break with him! But even as the idea flashed through her mind, she knew that his implied threat would surely be put into relentless execution: that he would kill her first, himself afterward.

And yet she had pledged her word to become this strange being's wife as a reward for his assistance in hounding Dan Dunn to death!

"Better Craig Dairmid than Alva Parrish!" she muttered, as she recalled that more recent compact between herself and the escaped convict, "Number 1,213."

It did not take the counterfeit "Indian Ann" long to give Craig Dairmid the agreed-upon signal that the trap had performed its part in that dark night's work, and that all was in readiness for the finishing touches. He quickly returned to the side of Harlequin Hat, giving a low, careless laugh as a sound of an opening door came down through the open trap above their heads.

"He falls to work as promptly as though he saw a glorious reward in the near distance, Hattie, does this genial doctor from the Pen! I sincerely trust he is too wise to be looking with longing eyes in your direction, my angel!"

"Curse your mad jealousy, man!" angrily flashed Harlequin Hat, as she sprang to her feet and faced him boldly. "Are you tiring of our compact, that you keep flinging your vile hints and silly insinuations in my way? If so—say the word as a man should, and we'll part right here and now—for all time to come!"

"I was wrong," humbly murmured the man, bowing his head with hands crossed before his chest. "My love is so fierce that I am hardly accountable for what I say or do, my angel! If only you would grant me a smile, a touch of the hand, a kiss—"

"Work first, pay after," harshly laughed the woman, turning to the back of the little cellar and flinging open a narrow door, through which rushed a gust of damp air. "This is only the first step won. You have much more work to complete before you can justly claim your

promised reward. Will it be any less sweet for complete abstinence in the interim, Alva?"

Those wonderful eyes flashed upon her, glowing like balls of fire in that dim light, but their owner kept silence. He had been warned. He dared not risk the loss of all he held worth winning in life.

Harlequin Hat seemed greatly pleased with this proof of her influence, and with a short, sweet laugh she patted his swarthy cheek with one hand, then hurriedly uttered:

"Come, unreasonable man who weeps for the moon! Help me with this lump of hated flesh, for Dairmid works rapidly when in earnest, and I've no wish to be chased through the tunnel by a flash of gas! I reckon you and I can manage to carry him as far as the carriage!"

"Not you, Mrs. Haylock," muttered the other, as Harlequin Hat bent over to grasp the motionless detective by the feet. "Only enough to help me get him on my shoulders."

"Can you carry him alone?" ejaculated the woman, with a doubting glance over his comparatively slender figure.

"With you looking on, I believe I could stand up under a mountain!" flashed Parrish, lifting the limp form from the ground and bringing it around to his back. "If I falter, you can offer your aid, Mrs. Haylock!"

With a little assistance from the ex-actress, Parrish balanced Dan Dunn across his bowed shoulders, then followed her silent lead through the dark tunnel, its earthen walls but faintly illumined by the unmasked lantern which Harlequin Hat carried in her hand.

A few seconds of this work brought them to the surface near a dilapidated board fence to the rear of the Old Rookery. Parrish lowered his burden to the ground, and hastily began to bind its feet and its hands behind its back, while Harlequin Hat, shutting off the light from the lamp, passed away through the night, but quickly returning in company with a short, squat man in rough clothing.

The two men quickly carried Dan Dunn to a closed hack which stood in waiting. Harlequin Hat and Alva Parrish entered after their unconscious victim, while the other mounted the box-seat and drove rapidly away, heading for the western approach to the mighty bridge which is the pride and boast of the Mound City.

"Good-by, Old Rookery!" laughed Harlequin Hat, as the bells rung out.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ALVA PARRISH CLAIMS HIS REWARD.

THE deep, booming strokes of the musical fire-bell, giving them the district in which the fire was located, rendered it unnecessary for either Harlequin Hat or Alva Parrish to look out of the carriage window to properly locate the fire.

"Our medical friend does his work swift and sure, Annette," softly laughed Harlequin Hat, leaning back in her seat with a sigh of satisfaction that all was progressing so smoothly with her risky plot. "Unlike some very worthy persons whom I might name but will not, Dairmid only requires once bidding, and—"

"Is it because he is so sure of his promised reward, Mrs. Haylock?" coldly interjected the man in feminine garments, his eyes glittering with the peculiar yellowish sheen of an angry cat in the dark.

Despite her strong nerves, the woman gave a start and visibly shrunk from the man whom she feared even more than she hated. What had he discovered? Could it be possible that he had overheard aught concerning the compact into which she, Harriet Haylock, had entered with Craig Dairmid? Did he more than suspect how she had given the self-same pledge to two different men?

Fortunately she was not obliged to answer his suspicions just then, for the Soft-Hand Detective now gave the first signs of life and returning consciousness since his death-like swoon on the floor of the death-trap in the Old Rookery.

Barely sufficient to offer the startled woman a plausible excuse for abandoning that perilous subject; a gasping moan, and a tremulous shiver which communicated itself to the arm of the woman beside whom the trapped detective had been propped, with Alva Parrish opposite on the front seat.

"Quick!" cried Harlequin Hat, her voice harsh and agitated as her white hands flew to the neck of the bound man-hunter and pressed his head back into the corner. "The sponge, Parrish! Would you have him send out a yell that might fetch all the police force howling at our heels?"

She might have spared much of this hasty breath, for Alva Parrish was prompt to act, and before her excited speech was half ended his sinewy hands were covering the face of the captive, pressing a dampened bit of sponge over his lips and nostrils.

The task would not have been so easy had Dan Dunn been in full possession of his senses, and able to have fought against the insidious drug, but he was not even conscious, though the effects of that frightful hour in the hell of gas was slowly wearing away, and he would

probably have recovered his full senses before the long bridge could have been traversed, only for the prompt precautions of the schemers.

"Don't give him too heavy a dose, man!" nervously muttered Harlequin Hat, plucking sharply at the arm of her ally as she felt Dan Dunn growing more limp and seemingly devoid of muscle. "If I had only left you to cover our tracks and fetched Doc along!"

To do her justice, she only meant that the dangerous drug would be safer while used by practiced hands, but her words seemed to set the blood of this wild-eyed man on fire, and to completely blot out from his memory the harsh lesson which Harlequin Hat had been forced to read him while in the dark pit beneath the Old Rookery.

"He might apply the drug, but would he—could he do this?"

He dropped the sponge and caught the ex-actress in his serpent-like arms, holding her helpless while his burning lips covered her face with kisses the most ardent imaginable.

So sudden, so unexpected was his action, that Harlequin Hat could make no defense before it was all over. Then, as she lay back by the side of the corpse-like detective, the lights from either side of the mammoth bridge, which the carriage was just then rumbling across, casting dim, ghost-like rays through the raised windows, showed her white, rage-convulsed face and the glittering weapon which she had plucked from her heaving bosom the instant his arms fell away from her form.

They showed the dark, smiling face of the man in woman's garb, who leaned forward a little as though to invite her steel, as he uttered:

"Strike, Mrs. Haylock! The river is handy, and has covered up many another murder! At least, I'll go to perdition with the taste of your rich lips upon my own!"

"It would serve you right—"

"And leave a clear field for the excellent doctor!"

"Are you really going crazy, Parrish?"

"Worse, Hattie," with a sudden change in his tones and manner, the one growing strangely sweet and melancholy, the other turning from harsh triumph to deepest dejection. "I have never known a sane moment since you first crossed my path and held out a hope—gave me to understand that when I had done the work you asked of me, I might name my own price without fear of refusal, let my price be as exorbitant as the most avaricious could span. And now—"

"You are clamoring for your reward before your work is done!" the woman coldly interposed, no longer menacing her companion, but still keeping the slender blade in sight as a warning. "One more such ugly break on your part, my good friend, and we two will divide until the Poles are Siamese Twins in comparison!"

"Death alone can divide you and me, Harriet," was the measured response, though Parrish sunk back in his seat, his yellow hands tightly locked in his lap. "I am not a man with whom even a woman of your Satanic charms can play fast and loose, without paying the penalty, and to open your eyes to this positive fact I treated you to a touch of my real quality just a bit ago. I will tell you more when we are safely across the river and at the Nest."

There was no reply. Harlequin Hat sat pale and cold and outwardly unmoved beside the unconscious detective, but her heart was filled with an angry terror such as no mortal had ever before inspired. For the first time since enlisting him, in her long-pondered life work, she began to know this wild-eyed, fire-blooded man.

By this time the carriage was drawing near the further end of the mighty bridge, and Alva Parrish silently drew the curtains before the windows, rendering it impossible for any curious eyes to say whether or not the vehicle was occupied.

There was a brief pause at the terminus, during which Harlequin Hat clutched her dagger and Parrish gripped the butts of two revolvers which bore the monogram of the Soft-Hand Detective. But there came no occasion for using them, and shortly afterward the hack was rolling swiftly along a dirt road.

It did not require many minutes for them to traverse the classic precincts of East St. Louis, the carriage quietly rounding to in the shadowed rear of a frame building situated in a considerable yard, or almost field, so far as extent was concerned.

Alva Parrish alighted first, and not until he had fully satisfied himself that the place was unwatched, did he attempt the removal of their captive. Aided by the driver, this was easily and quickly done, the two men carrying their limp burden into the house and up to the second story, lighted through the latter part of their trip by a lamp in the hands of Harlequin Hat.

Dan Dunn was deposited on a bed, without freeing his limbs from their stout bonds, then the driver was liberally rewarded and sent away about his business.

This was done by Alva Parrish, and though

Harlequin Hat may have preferred his lingering until the arrival of Craig Dairmid, she hardly cared to test her authority just then. The cold, yet blazing light in those peculiar eyes warned her to act warily, unless she wished to begin a fight which might end in a double death.

Not until the driver had left the premises and the sounds of his wheels had died away in the distance, did either utter a word. Then, with his face hard-set, his eyes glowing with a light that could hardly be born of reason, Alva Parrish slowly uttered:

"Now, Queen Harriet, have I not kept my oath? Through my arts your hated enemy is completely in your power, to kill or to torture as your sweet will dictates. Now—when am I to receive my promised reward?"

"When your labors are complete, not before, Alva," forcing a smile as though to soften her decision. "It is true that you have placed Dan Dunn in my hands, and so far I thank you for your skill, and—"

"Only thanks? Only empty words, Harriet?"

The woman hesitated for a single breath, then as if acting through an irresistible impulse, she stepped forward and lightly touched her lips to his. To be caught in a fiercely triumphant embrace that seemed almost enough to dislocate her bones. To have her faint cry smothered by his burning kisses.

"Mine—mine, now and forever!" passionately murmured the half-crazed lover, drawing back his head to gaze into her suffused face.

"Release me—look!" panted Harlequin Hat, nodding toward the bed where Dan Dunn was lying, his eyes widely opened and watching them.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE TIGRESS UNSHEATHS HER CLAWS.

WHETHER Alva Parrish was startled by that sight; whether he preferred not being seen and recognized by the man whom he had so adroitly decoyed into a fatal snare, through his still wearing the garb in which he had played the rôle of "Indian Ann," or whether he was content with the concession which he had forced from Harlequin Hat, he permitted that woman to hurry him out of the chamber, only pausing across the threshold to receive her hastily-muttered commands:

"Change that hideous disguise, my dear, and then buckle down to work. You know what is the next step marked out for you. Take it. Keep going until—well, you have had a fore-taste of what awaits you when the victory is complete, Alva! I'll judge how highly you value the perfect consummation, by your celerity of action from now forward!"

Those slender but wonderfully muscular fingers closed on her arm and drew her out from the doorway, holding her helpless until the mad lover had kissed her red lips repeatedly. Then, with not a word more Alva Parrish set her free, to glide away upon his duty.

Harlequin Hat paused long enough to smooth her disordered tresses and arrange her attire before returning to the room where Dan Dunn was lying helplessly at her mercy. And, strange though it may seem, there was a deep flush of embarrassment upon her beautiful face as she crossed the threshold to feel his big gray-blue eyes fixed upon her.

In her heart she was cursing the hot-blood who had caught her at such a disadvantage, and if she had not hated Alva Parrish before, she most certainly would have cursed him now.

It was this feeling of embarrassment which sent her like a tigress to the side of the bed where her hated enemy was lying bound, and led her to open upon him the floodgates of her long-brooded over revenge.

"At last, you blood-sucker!" her curved fingers hovering over that pale, lined countenance which betrayed how deeply the Soft-Hand Detective had suffered, in mind as in body. "At last I hold you in my grip, helpless, disarmed, weak and unmanned! At last—at last I can see the final wiping out of the bitter oath I took that night on the marshy shore of Lake Contrary! Do you remember it, Dan Dunn?"

"I'm too utterly amazed to remember with clearness, Hattie," was the strangely calm response.

"Amazed that I, a poor, weak, friendless woman should have prevailed over the boasted sleuth of the Mound City?" mockingly laughed the tigress in human shape.

"Not precisely, Harriet," still in that provokingly unmoved tone, still with that steady, yet indifferent light in his big eyes. "Amazed to see the dead outside of the grave. Amazed to see that in death, even as in life, the poor fellow is condemned to skulk and creep through the world in cunning disguise."

Harlequin Hat shrunk back a step, the flush slowly fading out of her face, a glow of angry fear creeping into her eyes as they closely scanned that face, looking handsomer than ever in its corpse-like pallor. For she began to fear that she had overreached herself and robbed vengeance of its sweetest charm by driving reason from the brain of her long-coveted victim.

"What do you mean?" she panted, hoarsely. "I don't understand you. If you are trying to play off crazy—"

She stopped short as Dan Dunn laughed softly, his lip curling in amused contempt at her evident fears.

"You think you have fitted me for an insane asylum, Harriet? You think my wits have gone woolgathering, simply because I expressed wonder at seeing— Shall I prove to you that I am still myself, Hattie?"

"Because, sane or insane, you still have to pay the penalty! Even if your brain should turn, your body still remains capable of suffering, and while a spark of life remains in your vile carcass, just so long will my thirst for vengeance remain unappeased!"

"If my mind fails, wouldn't my memory pale in unison, Harlequin?" pursued the Soft-Hand Detective, in the same provoking manner, curiously enough usurping the rôle of tormentor. "And that it is still unimpaired I stand ready to prove."

"I recall the evening you alluded to. I can close my eyes and see the damp, unpleasantly-pale face and figure of a man who rashly tried to swim through the death-weeds of Lake Contrary. I can even recall a fair woman, masculine though the garb which clothes her comely figure, and one of her legs—"

"You devil!" gasped Harlequin Hat, one hand pressing tightly over her swelling bosom, the other clinched and viciously menacing that pale but smiling face.

"And now—to see the dead alive! To see poor Horace Haylock risen from his untimely grave, his proud spirit so sadly broken that he can stoop so low as to cover his figure with the dress of a mestizo and stain his fair features an ugly yellow! Is it not enough to draw tears from a stoic, poor Hattie?"

The picture of wild rage and doubt, Harlequin Hat glared at the bound man, panting for breath and literally speechless for the moment.

"For of course it must have been Horace in whose arms I saw you reclining, Harriet," softly added the detective, a malicious laugh in his blue eyes at having so curiously turned the tables on his exultant captress. "You loved him so passionately! You grieved so bitterly for his untimely fate! You vowed such frightful vengeance on poor me, just because Horace preferred drowning to the rope!"

"You could not have forgotten all this so soon. You would not lie in the arms of another man, letting him kiss you, and even kissing him in return with such delicious abandon. And he, poor devil, in such hard case! Condemned to wander through the night with his manly form draped in petticoats and—"

With a shrill, choking screech of unutterable rage, Harlequin Hat sprung forward, her hands striking that mocking face, her fingers closing viciously about that muscular throat, her face convulsed, her eyes filled with an almost maniacal light.

Bound hand and foot as he was, Dan Dunn could make no effectual resistance, and knowing this, he did not attempt it, other than with a taunting, mocking, derisive glitter in his eyes as they gazed fairly up into that passion-convulsed face that hovered over him.

He could not have offered a more effective defense, for Harlequin Hat almost instantly relaxed her vicious grip on his throat, forcing a laugh from her lips as she drew back a pace, resolutely clasping her hands behind her back as though to fight against that hideous temptation.

"No, no, you cunning devil!" she uttered, her voice harsh and hardly recognizable. "Never such a speedy death as that! You came near fooling me at the last, but your eyes betrayed you, just in time!"

"When they saw you in the embrace of that fond lover, Hattie?"

"The man whom I have promised to marry, as pay for luring you into my death-trap, Dan Dunn!" laughed the woman, more naturally.

"Poor fellow!" sighed the detective. "I forgive him all his evil trickery against me, now!"

It was a stinging shaft, and Harlequin Hat showed as much by her changing countenance. She turned abruptly away, keeping her face hidden until she had fully regained her usual cool, steady, reliable nerve.

Then she brought a chair with her, placing it not far from the bed where the Soft-Hand Detective lay helpless save for his venom-tipped tongue. Seating herself, Harlequin Hat gazed steadily into his face, evidently prepared to fully enjoy her first taste of vengeance on the man who had driven her husband to death.

"You lied when you mocked me for having forgotten my husband, Dan Dunn," she began, her voice calm and even, though her eyes glowed with such fierce triumph. "You knew you were lying when you said it, but you thought to excite me to such a pitch that I would kill you outright."

"Commit suicide by proxy, as it were, Hattie?" smiled the detective.

"I never loved living man save Horace Haylock," she steadily resumed, paying no attention to his interpolation. "I love him even more

passionately now that he is moldering in his honored grave than I did in life, if that be possible. Yet—you saw me clasped in the arms of a man whom I have promised to marry after I have completed my vengeance on you and yours!

"Not through love, Daniel," with a cold, metallic laugh. "Simply because I could hardly hope to cope with you and your watch-dog unaided, and because I sorely needed just such aid and assistance as that man could afford me. He asked my hand as his reward. I granted his prayer. I would have stooped still lower, rather than lose a chance of dragging you down into the depths!"

"You've got me, Hattie," murmured Dan Dunn, with a glance of mock terror toward the door of the chamber. "Would you mind turning that key just a little stronger? If anybody should see me here, I'd—I'd never be able to live it down!"

He played his desperate part admirably, but the time for stirring his captress to fury had passed. She smiled coldly, but steadily took up the broken thread as though resolved to follow it to the end.

"You went out of your way to hunt us down, Dan Dunn. You sought the commission to look up our records, and once on that trail, you hung to it like a born bloodhound, turning aside for nothing, hesitating at naught, until you broke up our carefully laid schemes, until you drove my husband to death."

"I met with a luckless accident, or even then I would have saved his life or shared his death. As it was, you showed me even less mercy than you showed him. To him you gave death, but you made me live to suffer a million deaths as a convict among the lowest, the most degraded and vile!"

"I humbly beg their pardon, Hattie!" murmured the detective.

"Do you wonder, then, that I vowed my future to vengeance?" pursued the woman, outwardly unmoved, but with her glowing eyes showing something of the vicious passions under that calm surface. "Do you wonder that I swore, time and again, to never know rest or content until I had dragged you down to the lowest depths possible for human life?"

"For I hated you too fiercely, too intensely to think of killing you outright, Dan Dunn. Death might come, but it should not visit you until your utmost capacity for suffering was filled to overflowing!"

"I would not make a hasty move, Daniel," with a faint smile that rendered her words all the more impressive, though the bound man still maintained his careless, smiling, indifferent demeanor so far as even her keen eyes could see.

"It was a constant eating of my own heart, but I forced a smile and bided my time, even when I saw you living in a fool's paradise; for I knew that when I should strike, the blows would fall all the heavier and inflict so much the more anguish."

"Not until I had everything in train would I permit myself to lift hand or finger for the first stroke. Do you know what that was, my gallant hunter of men? Can you guess who it was that whispered the word which warned convict Number 1213 to risk his life in an attempt to escape before the fraudulent pardon could be placed in his hands?"

She paused as if for an answer, but Dan Dunn maintained silence. He knew that the time was past when he might excite her fury, and this being so, he would not give her the pleasure of seeing him make a failure. All he did was to yawn lazily, then slowly droop his eyes as if overtaken by somnolency despite his will.

"I did that, Dan Dunn," laughed Harlequin Hat. "And the more completely to throw dust into your cunning eyes, I prepared an alibi, and even had the audacity to—"

She stopped short as a light tread was heard on the uncarpeted flight just beyond the chamber door. In silence she waited until a soft, measured tapping came at the closed door. She flashed a glance toward the bound detective, and laughed softly as she saw his eyes open and fixed upon the barrier beyond which the new-comer was waiting.

"Come in, Unc' Tandy," she cried, distinctly. "The door is only on the latch, and there's a gentleman in here who wishes to see you!"

The knob turned, the door swung open and a tall, strong figure entered. No longer disguised as the aged negro, but Craig Dairmid!

CHAPTER XXXI.

A WOMAN'S WEAPON.

DESPITE his natural hardihood, Craig Dairmid stopped short as he met that cold, steady gaze, and something like a shiver crept over him as he recalled when last he had felt Dan Dunn's grip.

Harlequin Hat laughed lightly as she noted this, and cried:

"Come in, Doc! There's no earthly use in keeping the eyes of this precious sleuth full of dust. Never heed his glowering; Daniel is just the same as a corpse, only for planting!"

"A ceremony at which I shall be most happy

to officiate as—second mourner," bowed Dairmid, quickly rallying and fairly entering the room, closing the door behind him, adding with a malicious smile: "You effected an entrance without asking by my leave, this night, Dan Dunn, so you can hardly blame a poor, ignorant old nigger for copying your example."

There was no response. The prisoner knew that he was helplessly in the power of his merciless enemies, and that aught he might say would only give them additional sense of triumph.

"Take a seat, Doc," nodded Harlequin Hat. "I was just telling our very dear mutual friend that I not only warned you of the sting lying under the governor's honey-bag, in time for you to pardon yourself, but that this little defeat of his pet stroke was but a foretaste of the real vengeance which I vowed over the body of my murdered husband."

"Yes, Daniel," turning her great eyes, blue no longer, but filled with a greenish luster, like that shown by an angered cat, upon the man whose indomitable spirit she was bent on crushing before inflicting the death-blow. "I foiled you in that bit of comedy. I supplied the money which bribed the guards and the others who aided in our good doctor's escape. And it was my brain, if not actually my hand, which planned the surprise number two; the delightful news which hurried you back to town so suddenly!"

"Your departure from town was my signal for the work to begin. I plotted the entire affair, so I may rightfully lay claim to all the credit. To me you owe the death of your old father. To me you owe the fact that Zelna Mayne stabbed him to the heart!"

Harlequin Hat paused at this point, gloating over her victim, looking hungrily for some wild outburst of impotent rage or fierce denial. But none such came.

Had his face been covered with a marble mask Dan Dunn could not have hidden his emotions any more completely. He was pale, but that he had been all along. He only gazed steadily into the passion-flushed countenance of the ex-actress who thus accused herself.

"It was my brain that planned it all, Daniel," she resumed, hiding her fierce chagrin, under a harsh laugh. "I am only sorry that the peculiar nature of my vengeance would not permit my hand to execute, as well! And yet—I'm not so sure. I think that you have suffered more acutely in the knowledge that Zelna Mayne, the chosen love of your gallant heart, actually delivered the blow which my will directed."

"Why repeat that silly lie, Hattie?" asked Dan Dunn, his lips curling in a glance of icy scorn. "Miss Mayne has been fully cleared of that foul crime, and you know as much."

"Through rank perjury on the part of the man who should have been foremost in bringing the murderess to the gallows!" flashed Harlequin Hat, seeming to feel that a point was gained in having broken that stony silence. "The son lied to save the girl who had assassinated his father! His passion for a pretty face overcame his bloodhound instinct. A delicious record with which to end your career, Dan Dunn! A precious epitaph to place upon your tombstone! I'll spend my last dollar but what the world shall read that record long after your bones have crumbled and your flesh turned to dust!"

"But all this you have done with no avail, Daniel," her tones moderating so far as volume is concerned, though there was, if possible, an increase of rancor. "The same lips which saved Zelna Mayne from being brought to open trial for murdering Lapier Tostivan, shall accuse her of the dastardly deed! Your lips, Daniel!"

"With your sweet breath behind them, Hattie?"

"Not so, dear sleuth," with a soft, musical laugh, as she leaned back in her chair and gazed into his pale face through her drooping lashes. "She would hardly listen to such as I, this charming young lady who walks the pave throughout the livelong night, then pretends serious illness the more easily to deceive her doting lover! You shall do the accusation act, Daniel, and do it so thoroughly that not even her monumental gall shall prevail over it!"

Dan Dunn, bound though he was, turned over in bed, lying with his face to the wall, but he was not to escape so readily from his tormentor. At a swift sign from Harlequin Hat, Craig Dairmid reached the side of the bed, turning the detective back to his former position, insuring his remaining thus by maintaining his grip, seating himself on the edge of the bed.

Harlequin Hat nodded her approval, then took a white envelope from her bosom, deliberately unfolding the inclosure as she drew it forth.

"You thought to show your silent scorn for my bold assertion, Daniel, but I've taken entirely too much trouble to secure you for an auditor to be readily bluffed off. You can close your lids, but your ears are not so readily controlled."

"Human nature is mighty weak, Hattie," drawled the Soft-Hand Detective, making the best of an awkward situation. "If mine should

go back on me while listening to—is it a poem, little woman?"

"A love-letter, rather," laughed Harlequin Hat.

"To the man in whose arms you lay and whose kisses you returned so ardently but a few minutes before doctor came in?"

Harlequin Hat was not laughing now, nor was Craig Dairmid. She half-started from her seat at those first words, but the sudden glow of doubt and suspicion which she saw enter the face of her ally, held her back and checked her tongue.

"What man was that, Mrs. Haylock?" harshly muttered Dairmid.

"Part lie, part truth, Craig," her tones soft and musical, her face flushing but with great eyes meeting his suspicious glow frankly even supplicatingly as she added: "I warned you, remember. Alva Parrish did try to—did kiss me, but—I'll explain all when we are alone."

Dan Dunn made no further effort to sow mischief between his two chief enemies. He believed that the harm would take root, and if it did not result in good to himself, it might possibly avenge him on Harlequin Hat, Craig Dairmid, or the wild-eyed man who had so adroitly defooled him, Alva Parrish himself.

Dairmid also kept silent, but Harlequin Hat, rustling the sheet of paper which she held in her hand, rapidly added:

"Possibly I exaggerated a little when I called this screed a love-letter, Daniel, though it was written by a man to his promised bride, and of whom he takes a last, long farewell. It bears quite pertinently on several of the points I have called to your attention this evening, or possibly I might feel some delicacy in reading to you what was solely intended for the delectation of another."

"Delicacy is good!" laughed Dan Dunn. "Doctor, please make a low and respectful bow for me, won't you?"

"Wait patiently, Daniel, and I'll bend your proud neck quite sufficiently for all purposes," mocked the ex-actress, seeming to take a peculiar delight in postponing the reading, though apparently so anxious to deliver the stroke. "By the time I'm through with you, dear fellow, you'll nod and bow and sway to my lightest touch or gesture, equal in all respects to one of those toy mandarins seated in a bowl!"

"Wake me up when the show begins, Doc," feebly muttered Dunn.

It was hard for Harlequin Hat to keep her mad passions in check when she saw all her taunts and her efforts fall short of breaking down that matchless nerve, even though she felt sure that in the end her victory must be complete. That knowledge was not sufficient to satisfy her deadly hatred. She wanted to see as well as know that her hated enemy was suffering acute agony of mind.

She lifted the sheet of paper to hide her look of angry disappointment, and almost without thought she read aloud the opening words:

"ZELNA MAYNE:—"

"I write these words, because I dare not trust myself to utter them by word of mouth. If I was to enter your presence again, it would be to leave it a murderer, or remain a doubly perjured wretch, too utterly low and debased for even the love of such a beautiful fiend as yourself!"

"What do I mean? That I would be impelled to slay the woman who assassinated my poor old father, or lie again, knowing that you were only too well aware that I lied."

"I loved you so passionately that I not only condoned your crime, but I perjured my soul to save you from paying the penalty due such a deed. I love you still! I love you too madly to ever see you again! His face would ever rise between us, calling for vengeance! And so—farewell forever! From this hour on, I am dead to you and to the world."

"DAVID TOSTIVAN."

CHAPTER XXXII.

"YOU WILL NEVER SEE THE TRAP FALL."

CLEARLY, distinctly, deliberately Harlequin Hat read these lines, giving ample time for each sentence to eat its way into a far less alert brain than that of the man whose heart she was bent on wringing until he piteously begged for death to put an end to his torments.

As she pronounced the name appended to the screed, she lowered the paper and gazed maliciously toward her helpless captive, trying to read in his face the effect of her carefully studied blow.

Her face paled, her teeth clicked audibly together, her blood seemed to catch on fire with furious disappointment as she saw how scornfully Dan Dunn was smiling into her face.

"Is that all, Hattie?" he asked, arching his brows in mock surprise if not disappointment. "Have you brooded so long, only to hatch out such a poor weakling as that? Poor woman! Doc, got a handkerchief?"

Dairmid turned away his head to conceal a grim smile which he could not entirely smother. Though he hated this detective more than all the rest of his enemies combined, he was too bold, too cool-nerved and strong in suffering not to feel a certain degree of admiration for one who could successfully parry such heavy strokes as Harlequin Hat delivered.

"Is it so faulty, then?" asked Mrs. Haylock,

with affected dismay. "Do you think, having heard it read, that a fool held the pen?"

"Did you write it, Hattie?"

"I certainly did not!"

"Then, as the truth will not fall too close to your precious toes, I don't mind admitting, confidentially, mind you, that it's the worst I ever heard!"

"And you doubt Zelna Mayne's accepting it as truth?"

There was no response. Dan Dunn could not touch upon that sacred name in even seeming mockery or grim jest.

He could and did fight hard to make the triumph of this heartless woman less complete, but not until absolutely forced would he bring that loved name into the subject.

"You fear to promise aught where a frail woman is concerned, and you show wisdom in your last days, Daniel," with a malicious laugh. "In your heart—or in the organ which serves you in place of a heart—you know that she will believe, because she knows it is founded upon truth, even without the additional proof contained in the handwriting."

"You must have written to her more than once, Daniel. All men are built that way, even though the same roof-tree may cover both wooer and won! And so—the maiden fair will readily recognize the author! Or, in case of doubt, and doubt she may, after all you have sacrificed to save her dainty neck from being irritated by the hempen tie, Daniel! In case of doubt, she can quickly compare this with older bits of writing, which, of course, she has sacredly cherished and preserved."

Leaving her seat, Harlequin Hat crossed over to the bedside, holding the paper up before the eyes of the Soft-Hand Detective, yet in such a position that the full rays of the reflector behind the kerosene lamp attached to the wall above the head of the bed, fell upon the lines of writing.

"You ought to be a good judge, Dan Dunn!" she flashed, with vicious triumph in voice and glowing eyes. "Tell me the truth: could you have traced those lines more completely like your own natural handwriting?"

There was no immediate response, though she saw that her blow had struck home at last. Despite his remarkable nerve, the Soft-Hand Detective could not avoid a start and swift catching of his breath as he noted that wonderful bit of forgery.

As Harlequin Hat hinted, it was perfect in every curve.

Harlequin Hat saw his eyes slowly passing back and forth along the lines, and steadily held the paper at its most favorable angle until she saw his gaze pause upon his own name at the bottom.

She withdrew the paper, Craig Dairmid pressing the bound man back on the pillow lest he attempt to catch and mutilate the document with his teeth in his growing desperation.

"Is there aught in which it could be bettered, Daniel? Shall I cause another letter to be written by the same adroit hand? Don't be bashful, Daniel," with a soft, pleased laugh as those great eyes closed and a shiver stole over that helpless figure. "As this is your last, long adieu to Zelna, it ought to fully express your sentiments."

Dan Dunn opened his eyes, and there was such a deadly, vengeful fire smoldering in their depths that Harlequin Hat involuntarily shrunk back a pace before she could control herself.

"Unless your lust for revenge has driven you mad, Harriet Haylock, you will think twice before delivering that forgery to the lady whose name it bears," he coldly, steadily uttered.

"After having wasted so much time and preparation for dealing that very blow, Daniel? Deliver it? Ay!" with a vicious gleam of her great blue eyes. "I'll deliver it with my own hands, so that I may the surer catch every drop of my sweet revenge! I'll drive the poisoned barb still deeper into her bleeding heart, Dan Dunn, not that I hate her for her own self, but because she is still dear to your heart! And if I believe it will add one more drop of gall to her cup, I'll make her believe that I am to share your willing exile, David Tostivan!"

For the first time since that cruel ordeal began, Dan Dunn showed in his voice something of the hideous torment he was suffering, though his bearing was bold and unshaken.

"You have crossed the limits, Harriet Haylock. I know now that you are the foul assassin of my poor old father. And now I repeat what I said above his cold body that day. I repeat the never-dying vendetta which I pronounced while kneeling by his cold corpse."

"From this hour on, my sole object in life shall be to bring this atrocious crime home to you. To hunt you down and drag you to the gallows!"

Harlequin Hat leaned forward far enough to smite those pale lips with the tips of her slender fingers, then laughingly predicted:

"You will never see that trap fall, David Tostivan! And—shall I tell you why?"

There was no response. The Soft-Hand Detective lay silent and motionless on his pillow, his eyes gazing steadily into that flushed, yet diabolically beautiful face.

Instead of repeating her question, Harlequin Hat made a gesture which brought Craig Dairmid to his feet. They crossed the room together, conversing in whispers too low to reach the ears of the man who lay on the bed, so completely at their mercy.

So far as he could judge from outward appearances, Harlequin Hat was urging Dairmid to consent to something which did not fully meet with his approval. But in the end, as Dan Dunn anticipated, the ruthless woman gained her ends.

It needed only a passing glance into her flushed, triumphant face to tell him as much, and he tried to nerve himself to meet unflinchingly the impending ordeal.

"You declined to answer the question I asked you last, Daniel, but I'll overlook your rudeness sufficiently to enlighten you, all the same."

"Have you marveled why I should take so much trouble to set Craig Dairmid free from the Pen, when I had everything working so perfectly without him? Because I needed him for a particular purpose; because he is master of drugs which can change daylight into darkness, and—Ha! my brave hunter of men!" with a vicious laugh, as, despite himself, Dan Dunn gave a little start as he divined the hideous truth. "You begin to see? Well, make the most of it, for ere long seeing will be a thing of the past so far as those eloquent eyes are concerned! Doctor!"

"Are you firmly resolved to do this deed, Mrs. Haylock?" asked Craig Dairmid, slowly approaching the bedside, a small vial in his hand.

"Am I? Give me the drug and see for yourself!" cried the woman, her face flushing with hot anger and impatience.

Craig Dairmid evaded her effort to secure the vial, coldly saying:

"Not by your hands, Hattie. If it must be done—"

"It must! It shall!"

"Then I will do the work myself."

He uncorked the bottle and held it unsteadily over the face of the helpless victim, his own scarcely less ghastly the while.

"Look! he shrinks—he shivers—his boasted nerve is failing him at last!" almost hysterically laughed the tigress, snatching away the pillow from under his head to bring his face more on a level. "I shall have to hold his eyes open, poor devil!"

"You lie, murderess!" hoarsely cried Dan Dunn, then opened his eyes to their utmost extent. "Do your foul work, Craig Dairmid!"

The vial tipped quickly, and the limpid contents dropped into one eye after the other in swift succession.

A convulsive shiver passed through the bound man's frame, but he did not utter even a moan to betray the frightful torture to which he was being subjected, in mind no less than in body.

Blind! in complete darkness while life should linger in his body!

It was a revenge worthy a female fiend like Harlequin Hat!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WOMAN IN NAME ONLY.

LIKE some weird priestess of old, glorying over a human sacrifice, Harriet Haylock bent forward, her hands tight-locked, her red lips parted by her quick, panting breath, her face flushed darkly and her eyes all aglow with her mad longing to see and comprehend the full measure of torture which her hated enemy was now undergoing.

"This is only the beginning, Dan Dunn! This is but a single drop taken from the flood of my vengeance, and from this day on, day by day and hour by hour, fresh drops shall fall until in your intolerable agony of body and mind you will beg me to hasten death! You will pray to me as the one powerful being on earth! Ay! you will kiss my hands, my feet, the very dirt I shake from my shoes, seeking thus to secure my pity long enough to terminate your sufferings by death! And I—I will recall that evening on the marshy shore of Lake Contrary, David Tostivan!"

Through all this the Soft-Hand Detective lay without motion, without sound. Not even a muscle crept, not even a nerve of his face gave token of the frightful agony he was enduring both in body and in mind.

And Craig Dairmid, himself ghastly pale, as though sorely shaken by the dastardly deed into which he had been hurried by the mad fury of this woman whom he loved so desperately, despite his knowledge of her worse than worthlessness, could bear no more. He turned away from the sight, his head bowed, his powerful form quivering with suppressed emotions.

This action drew the attention of Harlequin Hat from her helpless victim, and with a slight loss of color she turned from the bed to follow the escaped convict.

"What is it, Dairmid?" she asked, one hand lightly closing upon his arm, checking his progress as surely as though a stoutly-armed barricade had suddenly risen directly in his path. "Surely you are not weakening at this early stage of the game?"

"I have done all I can, Harriet," was the low response, his face flushing and paling in alter-

nation, his eyes refusing to meet her keen gaze just then. "And—curse it all!" with savage vehemence as he flashed a look toward the bed where the doomed detective was suffering in stoical silence. "That sight sickens me! Sleuth, bloodhound though he may be, he's worth a thousand such as you or I, Harlequin Hat!"

For a single breath the woman stood as though petrified, for she had never counted on anything like this. If Craig Dairmid should fail her just as she was capping the climax, what would be the result? She could not complete her vengeance without his aid, and—

As if moved by an impulse which she could not resist, Mrs. Haylock touched her red, full lips to his, her arms locking about his neck. And she made no resistance to his sudden passion as he clasped her queenly form to his broad breast, holding her helpless despite her panther-like strength and agility, his lips fastened to hers, his dark eyes gazing into those blue, lustrous depths as if he would read all that lay behind.

Only such a woman could offer such a temptation! Only a man of Craig Dairmid's strong yet weak nature so instantly fall.

Harlequin Hat was almost breathless when that fiercely-loving embrace ended, but she was never more fully in command of her wits than in that moment, and as quickly as possible she parted:

"One word more—I must shake him!"

She glided back to the bedside where Dan Dunn was lying like a corpse, and mockingly uttered in her sweetest tones:

"Now you comprehend just why I was so certain you would never be a witness to my falling through the trap on the scaffold, Daniel, dear! I may hang, but you will never see it! And now—good-night, dearie, and pleasant dreams be thine! I'll take the light away with me, for fear its rays may keep you wakeful. Ta-ta, sweetie! Dream of me!"

With a laugh that was hideous in its very sweetness, Harlequin Hat took the kerosene lamp from the bracket at the head of the bed and with it in her hand moved toward the door. Craig Dairmid, no longer showing aught of weakness or remorse, though he sedulously refrained from glancing toward the bed on which their blinded victim lay, followed the woman who was leading him into even lower pits of infamy.

Harlequin Hat drew the door to behind them, with a distinct bang, but held the knob so the catch did not fasten, silently pushing the door ajar an instant later, her face filled with malicious expectation, her cruel eyes all aglow.

And then, as their footsteps no longer came to the ears of the doomed detective, his marvelous nerve gave way. A panting, choking groan escaped his laboring lungs, and then the husky, agonized words:

"God above! Sightless—blind—blind for life!"

Harlequin Hat caught the right hand of the escaped convict and swiftly lifted it to her lips, murmuring softly yet intensely:

"For the work it has done! For breaking down the matchless nerve and pluck of that demon in human guise!"

In her almost delirious delight as a victress over her hated and feared antagonist, Harlequin Hat permitted her voice to lift above the guarded whisper in which it was pitched at first, and despite his mental and physical torture, Dan Dunn must have caught sufficient to divine the truth, for he instantly lapsed into silence as stubborn as of old.

Harlequin Hat turned toward the door as if she would enter and taunt him with even so much weakness, but Craig Dairmid grasped her arm and held her back as he closed the door securely.

"No more to-night, Mrs. Haylock!"

"What do you mean?"

"That I have other matters to talk about with you, Harriet."

"They can wait another time," with an effort to free her arm from that resolute grasp. "I want to mock the bloodhound! I want to see him shiver and shake and writhe in blind agony! I want him to moan and groan and beg for death to put a period to his torments! I want—"

"You know that he is suffering all this, Harriet. You know that were you to stand by his side and mock and taunt him from now until the rising of the sun, never a word or a sign would you extort from his locked lips, let his tortures increase tenfold. He is a man, clean to the core!"

"You dare praise him?" panted Harlequin Hat, her eyes ablaze with fury. "To my very face?"

"It is only the truth, and you know that as well as I do," was the deliberate response, eye meeting eye, cold will confronting hot rage and easily winning the mastery. "I hate the man almost as bitterly as you, Mrs. Haylock, but if you persist in going back, I'll bear you company. And if I return to his bedside now, it will be to relieve the horrible agony he is suffering with his blinded eyes. Take your choice!"

Harlequin Hat gazed keenly into those dark eyes, and she saw how firmly he meant all he

threatened. Seeing this, she gracefully yielded for the time being.

"So be it, then, you autocrat of— What shall I call your empire, Doc?"

"Where is Alva Parrish, Mrs. Haylock?"

"Gone across river on a message of importance to our little game, Dairmid. Why do you ask?"

"How much truth was there in what Dan Dunn accused you of, in yonder, a bit ago, Harriet?"

"You mean—about that crazy hot-head?" hesitated the woman.

"You know perfectly well what I mean, Hattie, without asking so many questions. Why did he clasp you in his arms? Why did he kiss you? Why did you permit it? Or—was Dan Dunn lying when he swore that you not only received but repaid his caresses?"

Swiftly, passionately came the words, and despite her natural hardihood and nerve, Harlequin Hat visibly shrunk from the speaker. Not for long, though.

"Come into the next room, Dairmid," she said, quietly, meeting his half-suspicious gaze firmly and without flinching. "We can talk more comfortably there, and what I have to say may occupy many minutes. I am growing weary, now I haven't his face and helpless form to keep my mind on the strain. Come!"

In silence he bore her company into another and smaller chamber, scantily supplied with furniture. She placed the lamp upon a table, sunk into a chair, motioning him to another, then spoke again:

"You already know the best part of the big game I am playing, Doc, though we haven't had time or opportunity for going fully into the numerous details."

"About Parrish, Mrs. Haylock!" with a dark frown. "I'm not so deeply interested in the details. They can wait until later."

"If you wish me to explain everything, Dairmid, you must permit me to do so after my own fashion," was the cold retort. "You could not help me shape those details, since you were in the Pen. I chanced upon Alva Parrish, and in him I fancied I had found the precise tool I most needed."

"You know the work he accomplished, thanks to his marvelous mesmeric powers. You know that he forced Zelna Mayne to kill Lapier Tostivan by exercising those powers. He failed in the main point, thanks to Dan Dunn, and the girl is still at liberty; but I could not blame him for that, since he was forced to act on my instructions rather than his own knowledge."

"I needed his services, Dairmid. I offered him his own price, meaning money, of course, but he demanded more: my pledge to marry him when his share of the work was done!"

"The foul cur! I'll cut his heart out for that!"

"Do it—do it, Dairmid, and I'll give you your reward the hour you ask it, whether the game is played to an end or not!" flashed Harlequin Hat, her eyes blazing, her face convulsed with eager passion.

Was it too eager? Was it her utter heartlessness that warned the escaped convict not to too blindly accept her bare word?

Wicked though he was, with many a ruthless crime staining his past life, an escaped convict with the charge of capital crime overhanging his head, Craig Dairmid was not utterly evil. There was at least a trace of manhood left in his composition, and the events of that night had slightly shaken his blind infatuation for this beautiful but heartless woman.

She had pledged herself to reward two different men, almost in the same breath. She was begging one of them to remove the other, now that other had performed the work stipulated for. And realizing this, Craig Dairmid mechanically caught himself asking how it would fare with himself when he could no longer be of service to Harriet Haylock?

Would she turn him over to the tender mercies of still another blind slave?

Excited though she was, Harlequin Hat retained sufficient keenness of wit to divine something of what was shaking the allegiance of the strong man on whose aid she now relied to extricate herself from the mire, and with her voice softening, her eyes filling with moisture, a warm hand trembling slightly as it touched his hand, she uttered:

"Remember, Craig, this was before I ever dreamed of your loving me. My heart was dead—so I thought, then!—and I could not hope to succeed without that demon's aid. I never meant to keep my pledge, for I thought I could buy him off after his work was done. I never knew how surely cracked his brain was and is. But now—Craig, you will relieve me from all fear of another foul insult such as Alva Parrish inflicted upon me this night? Kill him! Wipe out that foul outrage, or I swear that I'll never give my lips—the lips that crazy cur dared to pollute—to you as your own for life!"

All prudence was carried away at that touch, those appealing eyes, those half-sad, half-furious words. Craig Dairmid forgot his suspicions and his doubts, and he hoarsely uttered:

"I'll do it, Hattie! I'll follow the cur across

the river and put an end for all time to his mad tricks! Where'll I find him?"

"Here, Dairmid," with a glowing smile. "Time enough to-morrow, when he comes back to report to me in this house!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE WATCHDOG ON THE SCENT.

MEANWHILE Robert Turnbull was not wholly idle, though circumstances prevented him from moving nearly so rapidly as he could have wished.

Not that he had much difficulty in securing Curly Moran, one of the thugs who had assaulted him and tossed him into the cellar where they evidently counted on his being drowned like a blind and helpless puppy. Almost before that member of the slums realized what was in the wind, he was securely ironed and unable to offer any resistance, more especially as several stout policemen promptly rallied at Turnbull's call, thus preventing a possible rescue by his fellow-thugs.

Turnbull recognized Curly Moran by his peculiar voice, thanks to a badly-broken nose received in some affray, but, strong as was his excitement, the watchdog was cool enough not to betray the prime object of that arrest, lest word be carried to Headquarters and thus destroy the last hope of saving Dan Dunn, provided, of course, that the Soft-Hand Detective had not met his death in that blazing mass of ruins.

Curly Moran was given a ride in one of the patrol wagons and safely lodged in a snug cell. Robert Turnbull told his story, and set a strong force to work at the ruins of the Old Rookery, pulling it over bit by bit, resolved to find any relic, however small, by which the doom of his loved master could be decided.

When Curly Moran was placed where he could by no possible means betray the purpose of his arrest, Turnbull and Captain Drake, now a good friend and firm ally instead of a suspicious rival, took turns in questioning the prisoner, hoping thus to extract the whole machinery of the cunning plot through which Dan Dunn had been led into a trap.

For a time all this was labor spent in vain. Curly Moran possessed a certain cunning nerve of his own, and knew that he could come to no serious harm as long as he kept a close guard over his tongue. He denied being one of the thugs. He denied knowing aught of Dan Dunn's visit to the Old Rookery, and swore that he knew still less of the people who had recently taken up their residence in those quarters.

He swore doggedly that he was drawn to the spot by the alarm of fire, and that up to the very minute of his assault, he had never seen Robert Turnbull before.

The days of the inquisition are popularly supposed to belong to the dark ages, and nothing more than a grisly memory at the present time. Yet Curly Moran could have told a far different story if he had been allowed.

Captain Drake, bound by his oath of office, of course could not stoop so low as to torture a man whom he morally knew was guilty, but Robert Turnbull was restrained by no such etiquette. His prime object was to learn precisely what fate had befallen Dan Dunn, and if a thousand thugs had to undergo torments in order to reach this point of enlightenment, the wiry little detective was ready to turn the screws!

"You've got to peach, Curly," he would say, quietly, but with all the more impressiveness for that. "I can ask heap oftener than you can refuse, and yes has got to come in the end. It rests with you whether that yes comes while you're strong and whole, or only after you're all broke up and crippled. It's got to come, anyhow!"

Curly Moran doggedly refused to accept good advice, and closed his teeth with a grim determination to "grin and bear it."

Bear it he did, throughout the entire day which followed his capture, though Turnbull, growing more pitiless the longer the ugly rascal held out, pressed "the question" harder and more emphatically. But there is a limit to human endurance, even in a blessed cause, and in the end Curly Moran "weakened," crying out for mercy and swearing that he would suffer no longer though all "the family" were hanged!

After a stern warning to be sure his tongue did not stray from the direct path of plain truth, under penalty of suffering far worse, his confession was taken. He told all. He swore that Harlequin Hat was at the head of his gang, and that this gang was a remnant of the old Night Hawks which Dan Dunn had broken up nearly two years before.

He told much more which need not be detailed in this connection, but Robert Turnbull was so strongly impressed by what he did say, that he immediately prepared a strong force of police, under Captain Drake, and detectives, under himself, for a raid across the river in East St. Louis.

Only to the chosen men was the matter broached, and even they only knew that a raid of some sort was on the tapis; only Captain Drake and Robert Turnbull knew in which direction the stroke was to fall.

Curly Moran was left on his cot, comforting himself and soothing his hurts with the knowl-

edge that should the raid fail, or should the valuable game not be found in the precise spot described, he would receive another inquisitorial visit; the raiding-party left the station in couples, with an understood rallying point in mind.

At this point two canvas-covered milk-wagons awaited them, and in these unsuspicious-looking vehicles, maintaining perfect silence, the compact little squads were conveyed across the mighty bridge which spans the Father of Waters and connects two great States.

When the bridge was cleared, and the network of steel rails left to one side, the wagons drew up in the gloom and the men alighted. The teamsters, chosen from among the force, but in civil dress, were bidden to await the return of the party or some message to countermand that order, and then the determined squad separated into pairs, silently diverging and having a certain building for a common center.

Though so eager to effect the rescue of Dan Dunn, if still living, the party were none the less eager to punish the author of that bold outrage, and took their time to complete their investment of the lone building, gradually creeping up on all sides until it would hardly have been possible for even a nimble rat to slip through without detection.

Robert Turnbull demanded as his right the front of the house, by way of which admission was to be obtained, with or without the consent of the inmates! Were there any such? If so, they gave no signs.

Not a sound of any sort came from the lone building. Not a ray of light came through any of the windows. To all appearance the place was entirely deserted, save for the dark figures now creeping closer and closer about the structure, until each unit could almost reach another on either hand.

Robert Turnbull began to fear that they had come too late, or that Curly Moran had procured a respite through a cunning tissue of lies. But he did not falter, did not hasten or retard his movements in the slightest particular for that.

He reached the front door and silently screwed a peculiar article to the cross panel, close by the lock. This done, he cautiously, deliberately knocked, using the peculiar combination taught him by Moran.

There was no answer. Again, and still again, he repeated the signal which, if Moran spoke true, would indicate that a member of "the family" desired immediate admission. But still only the faint echo responded.

Then Robert Turnbull struck a match, covering it with his curved hands until its clear flame touched a pendent fuse. The instant the bright sparks began to shoot forth, he slipped to one side, pressing close to the house, awaiting the result of the explosion.

This was not long delayed. The petard performed its work to perfection, and dashing through the cloud of smoke, flashing his unmasked lantern ahead of him in a wide circle, Robert Turnbull entered the building, closely followed by half a dozen picked men.

Captain Drake led these, leaving enough on the outside to guard against any of the inmates escaping by flight.

Each left hand held a lantern. Each right hand a cocked revolver.

"The lower floor first, lads!" shouted Captain Drake, setting the example which he wanted followed, his tones ringing from cellar to rooftop the better to make himself comprehended both by his men and the enemy if such were within hearing. "Show quarter to all who hold up their hands, but shoot all who resist or try to break away!"

Robert Turnbull, seemingly guided by instinct, only gave a passing glance about him as he leaped up the narrow flight of steps, half a dozen at a time. Straight as though gifted with the scent of a bloodhound, the faithful fellow hurled himself against the door of the room in which Harlequin Hat confined Dan Dunn. That one thrust of his shoulders shattered the fastenings and flung open the door with a resounding shock. And then—the broad fan of light fell upon the bed and its occupant!

"Dan—God above!" gasped Turnbull, faltering as he saw that white, corpse-like face turned toward him, lying without motion or—

A glad, choking cry rose in his throat as he sprang forward to fall upon his knees by the bed. Not dead! Alive! Surely the eyes opened and the head moved at his ejaculation?

"Robert—take me home—take me to Zelna!" hollowly came a voice from those livid lips, scarcely recognizable as that of the Soft-Hand Detective.

"Thank Heaven you still live, master!" sobbed the shadow.

"Live—I'm blind—blind forever!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

ROBERT TURNBULL could hardly believe the evidence of his own ears, though they told him Dan Dunn must have suffered beyond the powers of mere words to describe before his strong nerves could have been bent and shaken like this.

He sprang to his feet and caught up the lantern which had fallen from his hand as his eyes first recognized his loved master. He tried to think the sufferer was just waking from a dream in which he had thought of going blind. Or that the privations he had undergone had temporarily affected his mind. Not blind in reality. That would be too horrible!

Blind? A blind detective? Those rare eyes forever sightless?

He tried to force a laugh at the thought, but he only brought forth a hollow groan instead.

For now the mask lantern was bearing full upon that face, so white and corpse-like, so worn, so deeply lined, so much older in looks than it had been when Robert Turnbull made his report concerning the Indian-like hag whom he had shadowed to the Old Rookery! And that was barely eight-and-twenty hours ago!

The red and swollen lids were lifted, but the balls behind them seemed covered with a film, such as glazes the eye of a dead fish in frosty weather.

"What have they done to you, Dan?" the faithful watch-dog managed to utter, though to a stranger his words would surely have sounded as in a foreign tongue.

With a desperate effort the Soft-Hand Detective collected his sorely-shattered nerves, and slowly replied:

"Blinded me, Robert! Remember them—Harlequin Hat and Craig Dairmid! Hunt them down if you love me! Hunt them down—but fetch them one by one within reach of my hands before you harm them!"

There was an awful meaning in those concluding words, but Robert Turnbull seemed to accept them as perfectly natural.

"I will, master. As Heaven hears me, I'll bring them to you for judgment. If I fail, may my punishment prove even worse than the torture you have been called upon to undergo!"

"Hullo!" cried Captain Drake at this juncture, springing to the entrance from the stairs, and stopping short at the strange sight. "You have found him, Turnbull? Why the devil—bound still?"

"Find them—Harlequin Hat and Craig Dairmid!" sharply cried Dan Dunn, lifting himself to a sitting posture despite his bonds, turning his ghastly, sightless face toward the door, guided by that voice. "Have you found them, Drake?"

"Neither hide nor hair, worse luck!" was the frowning response as the captain entered the room, gazing curiously into that sadly-altered countenance the while. "When did you see them last?"

The choice of words was natural enough, but very unlucky for one so thirsty for information. "See? I'm sightless!" hoarsely panted the Soft-Hand Detective, falling back on the bed more like a log than a living body.

Though so greatly startled by this, and so full of hot indignation against the miscreants who had committed such an atrocious outrage, Captain Drake was less shaken than Robert Turnbull, and it was his keen knife that cut the bonds and set the detective at liberty, so far as his limbs were concerned.

Though neither of the two men possessed any particular knowledge in that line, each examined the inflamed eyes of the Soft-Hand Detective while trying to alleviate his pain as much as possible. Each formed an opinion, but while Captain Drake frankly declared that the case looked very bad, faithful Robert sturdily declared that a perfect restoration of sight was but a question of a few hours at the outside.

And while uttering the words, scalding tears of grief, dismay and tenderest pity were streaming from his own eyes.

The house was searched from top to bottom, but nothing was discovered of the schemers who had brought Dan Dunn to such a piteous plight. There was absolutely no clew to explain why they had left the man for whose capture they had risked so much, alone and unguarded, liable to be discovered by any passer-by in case he should lift his voice in a desperate appeal for help.

The building was deserted, its only inmate the bound detective. So far as appearances went, not an article of furniture had been removed, and there was nothing to show that the Night Hawks did not intend to return shortly, save the one curious fact of their leaving Dan Dunn ungagged and alive.

The knowledge that friends were once more about him in a measure restored the shattered nerves of the detective. He urged them to take him as speedily as might be across the river where he could have his eyes looked after by an oculist, but he was still man-hunter enough to suggest an armed guard being left in concealment at the house, in case Harlequin Hat or Craig Dairmid should venture back to look after their victim.

A man was sent to bring one of the covered wagons closer to the spot, and a quantity of bedding was taken from the house on which Dan Dunn might be made comfortable in body while crossing the river and gaining the house which sheltered his promised bride.

A litter was suggested, but the Soft-Hand Detective vetoed that, rising to his feet and

proving his returning powers by walking across the floor unaided. But then, with a pitiful, gasping cry, he staggered, his arms extending, his face convulsed as he realized the full extent of his helplessness as one recently gone blind!

It was pitiful beyond description, knowing what this man had been but a few short hours before.

Only Captain Drake and Robert Turnbull of the rescuing party bore the helpless Samson company across the bridge and to the Mayne residence, the rest of the squad being left to watch the "nest" and make a search through East St. Louis for the Night Hawks.

Dan Dunn would not hear to stopping first for an examination of his eyes, for even his own deplorable condition was not important enough to make him forget how vindictively Harlequin Hat had menaced the woman of his love, and he wanted most of all to feel that she was safe and secure as yet.

So the wagon drove directly to the building, still guarded by the police, and Dan Dunn sent Robert ahead to warn Zelna and the major of his arrival.

"Don't tell them—don't let her know the whole truth," he huskily uttered. "Just say that a little accident has happened, and for fear she would hear it exaggerated, I hurried at once to reassure her."

Turnbull performed his mission as quickly as possible, then returned to his friend and master, to whom he was more than ever a slave in the utter helplessness which had fallen upon him.

Dan Dunn took off the bandage which, at his own request, had been placed over his inflamed eyes before leaving his prison.

"It would scare my little girl," he muttered, forcing a smile as he leaned on the wiry arm of his little shadow, slowly climbing the steps leading to the front door. "Take me in the parlor, Robert. Turn up the lights, but place me facing the door by which she must enter. Tell me when she comes—but I'll know that! Start me right, and I'll try to keep her ignorant of the fact that—that—"

He could not finish the sentence. Truly Harlequin Hat should be proud of her glorious work! She had broken the will, quelled the spirit, shattered the nerve of the man who had been the cause of her husband's death—as she viewed the matter.

But that little comedy was not to be performed just as Dan Dunn hastily sketched it, thanks to the nimble movements of love, for, just as the two men entered the vestibule, Zelna Mayne came floating down the stairs, a sobbing cry parting her lips as the light fell across that ghastly-pale countenance.

Instinctively Dan Dunn turned his eyes toward that voice, and—

"Zelna!" he gasped, flinging aside the supporting arm of Robert Turnbull and stretching out his hands with a hoarse, choking cry. "God of love! I can see her face!"

Then, without warning, the poor fellow fell to the floor in a limp and senseless heap.

Meanwhile Captain Drake had hurried away at top speed in quest of a celebrated oculist and surgeon, bent on knowing just what the unfortunate detective had to expect for the future. He brought him in an ambulance, at breakneck speed, and reached the house only a few minutes after Robert Turnbull and Major Mayne contrived to get Dan Dunn up-stairs and on a bed.

The oculist made a careful, thorough examination, breathlessly watched by all, who hung on his movements as though their own eyesight depended on his decision. And when the great man spoke, which was not until he was confident he had positive facts to support his theory, few men have had a more intensely interested audience than he.

"The sight is not destroyed, and if my directions are carefully followed out, Mr. Dunn will be able to recognize his friends to-morrow. And if he is ordinarily prudent, he will be as clear-sighted as ever in less than one week."

There was a period right here, caused by Zelna Mayne in her speechless thankfulness. And the great man smacked his lips afterward, just as though he liked it.

He went on, with a great many technical terms and marvelously long combinations of letters, to explain: that either Craig Dairmid had mistaken the properties of the drug he used, or else he was knowingly deceiving his partner in crime. For, even without the soothing lotion which he, the great man, was then applying, the inflammation would in due time have subsided, leaving no lasting injury.

The lecture was ended, the bandages applied, the instructions given, and the great man still lingered in the sick-chamber, looking as though he would not be seriously offended in case Zelna Mayne repeated her grateful assault of a few minutes previous. But he waited in vain. The maiden had forgotten the very existence of all save her promised husband.

It was the second day following the rescue of the Soft-Hand Detective through the unceasing

efforts of honest Robert Turnbull, that a visitor sent his name in by one of the men still on guard before the Mayne residence. Robert Turnbull brought it, his eyes glowing strangely, his facial muscles twitching curiously as he handed the card to Dan Dunn.

"Show him in, and follow to the door," hastily uttered the Soft-Hand Detective, his face flushing as he gazed at the face of the card, reading over and over the hastily-scrawled name, "Alva Parrish."

For the great man had spoken true: Dan Dunn was able to see once more, though his sight was still a little dim, his eyeballs a bit tender under a strong light, though rapidly recovering their normal power.

As it chanced, he was alone in the room for a few minutes, Zelna being busied up-stairs, and the major in his own room, smoking.

Robert Turnbull quickly followed orders, ushering a slender, shabbily-dressed figure into the parlor, stationing himself in the doorway, firmly declining to comprehend Dan Dunn's sign to close the door and stand out of sight. In one hand he held a revolver, cocked and kept unwaveringly covering the form of Alva Parrish, ready to kill or cripple at the slightest sign of treachery.

"Be seated, sir," coldly uttered the Soft-Hand Detective, rising from his own seat and placing a chair for the man where the clearest light would strike his face and figure. "Pardon me if I ask—shall I call you Alva Parrish, or Annette Mauvais?"

"Either or neither, just as suits you best, Mr. Dunn," was the reply, in a low, mechanical tone. "You know who I am and what I have done. I come to-day to tell you even more; to confess who killed your father, and surrender not only myself, but the prime worker in that crime!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AN INNOCENT ASSASSIN.

At this moment the front door opened hastily and Captain Drake entered, his eyes aglow, his face flushed as though he had been running or doing some very rapid walking.

"Hullo!" he ejaculated, taken a little aback as he saw how calmly Dan Dunn was sitting in the presence of the man who had lured him into that terrible trap at the Old Rookery. "Well, if you can stand that—"

Robert Turnbull cheerfully gave way to allow the stern officer to pass into the room, a grim pleasure showing on his face as Drake shut one muscular hand on the shoulder of the wild-eyed man, his other rapidly, deftly sweeping over his person in search of concealed weapons.

Alva Parrish made not the slightest resistance, though the ghost of a smile flickered into and out of his swarthy face as the captain paused, perplexed, having found not even a pen-knife in the way of injurious articles on his person.

"What have I to do with arms, captain?" coldly asked the strange being, his glittering eyes lifted to that stern, hard countenance. "I have come here to tell my story, then accept whatever fate may seem most befitting the part I have played in this business. You sought the town through for me, and found me not. I was not ready to be found, then."

"I've found you now, at any rate, my fine fellow!"

"Call off your bulldog, Mr. Dunn, or I'll close my lips and let him tell my story for me," calmly uttered Parrish.

"Oblige me, Captain Drake," sharply uttered Dan Dunn, pointing to a chair standing to one side. "This visit is to me. This man has my permission to speak, without interruption unto the very end. I owe you much; don't make me turn upon you harshly, captain!"

Without a word the captain fell back, sinking into the chair indicated, his sternly-handsome face a picture. What did all this mean? What sort of a ruse was Alva Parrish trying to carry out?

"Now, Mr. Parrish," coldly commanded Dan Dunn, shading his still tender eyes from the light which fell fairly upon the other, "please say just what you meant by the words you made use of a bit ago."

"To tell you everything about the manner in which Lapier Tostivan met his death," was the cold, almost emotionless response. "To make all clear to you, then accept whatever punishment you may think most befitting the part I played in that tragedy."

"One moment, sir," interrupted the detective, his eyes gaining a fire such as they had not known since the moment when they received their fiery baptism at the command of Harlequin Hat. "I have sworn a vendetta against all who took part in that assassination. I have sworn to hunt them, one and all, to the gallows for murdering my father. I will not spare you, even for the sake of gleaning positive proof against the rest of the evil gang. Now, if you care to, tell your story."

"If I wanted to avoid the penalty, would I come here, alone, unarmed, accusing myself?" coldly asked the strange creature, his thin lips curling as with scorn. "Your whole force could not unearthen me before I was ready to speak. I am here. That is a sufficient answer."

"Never mind who and what I am, or what my antecedents. When you have swung me through the trap, there will be ample time in which to gratify any curiosity on that point. What I am, you see. What I have been, concerns you not."

"Of course there is a woman in the case. There ever is, where crimes are to be committed and homes ruined. There was a woman in the case, and you know her best as Harlequin Hat."

"I met her first in this city, nearly a year ago, and not long after she was pardoned out of the Penitentiary, at Jefferson City. I met her by chance, and in meeting her, I met my fate. It sounds silly, even in my own ears, but I am here to tell the plain, unadorned truth. I fell in love with Harriet Haylock!"

"Up to that hour there was not a single blot to be found on my record. I had never committed an action which I would have blushed to have my mother, dead and, I trust, in heaven, witness. I do not say this in boasting, nor as a plea for clemency. I tell you so much, the better to make you comprehend how intensely I must have loved this woman, fresh from the prison-cell, and still tainted with crime. I knew all this, long before I knew her name, but it made no difference. I loved her—and I love her still!"

"Never mind how I first formed her acquaintance. A man of my age and of my passionate disposition, is not too bashful to seek for what he wants most. I sought; I believed I found; but it was a lie, like all the rest of her thoroughly evil life."

"I was flattered at first by her remarkable interest in the one talent of which I was possessed. She had always longed to know more of mesmerism, hypnotism, to use the modern nomenclature. And, being flattered, I naturally showed her my skill at its best."

"Then—you can readily understand how it all came around, knowing Harriet Haylock as you do. She first made sure that I was wholly her captive, then she began to hint at the tragedy which recently set the whole town agog."

"I shrunk from it at first. Don't misunderstand me, sir. I do not say this by way of palliation. I simply put the fact on record. I even tried to laugh, to argue her out of the idea, to swear, in the end, that I would not only take no part in the atrocious deed, but I would save her from herself by openly warning her named victims."

"At the time, I firmly meant what I said. But—she was a woman formed for love, and she knew rarely well how to use her charms to the best advantage. She—never mind," with the first emotion since he began his confession, "I was as wax in her hands."

"The first steps taken by her orders, were to assume the rôle of Annette Mauvais. As Annette Mauvais, I called on Lapier Tostivan when positive there was no fear of being surprised by you," bowing coldly to the Soft-Hand Detective. "As Annette Mauvais, I sowed the seed of suspicion which—but why go into details? You have hardly forgotten the story I told you, the son, and it surely is enough to say that I told him much the same."

"The only material difference was that I showed him sundry documents, placed in my hands by Harriet Haylock for that purpose, which on their faces substantiated my dark charges against Nelson Mayne. How Harriet Haylock procured them, I never cared to ask. It was enough that they formed part of the labor I had to perform, before reaping the rich reward which she solemnly promised me when the game was won."

"That was the first move. The second was to follow as soon as you were safely out of town, thus leaving a clearer field. It was against a certain portion of this second move that I objected so strongly, until—at first."

"For the first time my peculiar powers of will were to be tested after a terribly practical fashion. The whole programme was laid out in advance, and every little detail carefully considered, every obstacle discounted and provided for."

"Yet, when the crucial moment arrived, fate seemed to be playing directly into our hands, and many of the minor points were rendered unnecessary, among them that of decoying Nelson Mayne from his house. As for Lapier Tostivan, that was easy enough. Annette Mauvais was to call upon him in his office, at eleven o'clock, with more proofs of her tale that negro and Indian blood ran in the veins of the girl whom his son was pledged to marry."

"You spoke of my peculiar eyes, Mr. Dunn, and said that they were remarkably like those of a certain woman who called upon Zelna Mayne the same night on which your father met his death. You were right, for those eyes were mine, the same you are looking into right now!"

"As Annette Mauvais I called upon her, fortunately, for our plot, to discover her alone. I meant to overpower, gag and abduct her by main force, if I found any difficulty in subjecting her will to mine, but this proved unnecessary. Before we had interchanged a dozen words, the lady was wholly at my mercy."

"Be careful, you demon!" grated Dan Dunn, wickedly.

"Wait until you hear all, then let your vengeance fall as swift and heavily as you think fit, Mr. Dunn," was the cold, unmoved retort.

"I willed the lady to go to her room and put on her wraps. I willed that she bring with her the dagger with which Lapier Tostivan was killed. This was my first test, and it succeeded to a charm. The lady obeyed, as if in a fit of somnambulism. She went, she came, she held up the dagger when I bade her show it, she followed me into the street."

"It was yet too soon to call on Lapier Tostivan, according to appointment, and I occupied that interval in thoroughly testing my tool. And when the fatal hour struck, I was completely satisfied. Had I bidden her stab herself, or cut off her right hand, she would have obeyed. Instead, I willed her to enter the office of Lapier Tostivan, giving the name of Annette Mauvais to insure admission. I willed her to stab him to the heart with the dagger she carried, and—"

With a savage curse Dan Dunn leaped straight at his throat!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE MYSTERY SOLVED.

"DAVID! my love—my all!"

The words came from the lips of Zelna Mayne as she beheld her maddened lover gripping Alva Parrish by the throat, lifting him clear of the floor and shaking him much as an offended mastiff might shake an impudent cur for snapping at its heels.

She sprung past Turnbull, and looped her fair arms about the neck of the Soft-Hand Sport, pantingly crying:

"Spare him, David! Spare him—to admit the truth—to swear that he has lied to you in hinting that I had part in that cruel deed!"

What man could not have won by force of muscle, Dan Dunn swiftly conceded to the voice of love. He thrust Alva Parrish into his chair, then drew back a pace with his hands clasping those of the maiden in defense of whose fair fame he was ready to commit murder, if nothing short of that would suffice.

Until now, neither Captain Drake nor Robert Turnbull had taken a single step toward rescuing Parrish from that deadly grip. The one was cold and grave as he watched that swarthy face turn darker and more nearly black; the other absolutely grinned with pure delight, and shuffled from one foot to the other as though on the verge of melting into a veritable horn-pipe of delight.

Alva Parrish gave a painful gasp or two, then quickly recovered his outward calm. He even forced a smile as his strangely brilliant eyes riveted themselves upon the pale, frightened, yet indignant countenance of the maiden, and his tones were even as ever when he uttered:

"You would have strangled me like a sheep-killing eur, just for speaking the truth, David Tostivan. Dare you put my powers to the test? Dare you ask me to prove to you how completely I can subject that young lady to my will? Shall I will her to strike you with an imaginary weapon? Or—still severer test!—shall I will her to abandon you for shelter in my arms?"

"You demon—"

"Dare him—test him, David!" flashed Zelna, pale but with eyes that for brilliancy fairly matched those strange orbs.

For a few seconds those eyes met, the grim mirth of the madman slowly dying away, his face turning pale and corpse-like once more. And then he spoke again, in the old emotionless tone:

"What matter? Why waste time in such folly? Once I was proud of my marvelous gift, but now—add boaster, braggart, liar to my other titles won since I fell under the influence of Harriet Haylock."

"What matters it to me? The world has come to an end so far as I am concerned, and my only wish now is to find a period for myself. Yet—it is for you to say whether I explain more fully, Mr. Dunn. It is for you to say whether I shall clear away all the remaining mists, or leave that to your much-vaunted powers as a detective."

"Say on, Alva Parrish," coldly ordered the Soft-Hand Detective, now standing by the chair in which he had seated his love. "But if you dare to even hint that my promised wife had aught to do with that cruel crime, I'll tear your lying tongue from its fastenings!"

"If I speak at all, I'll tell the plain truth, Mr. Dunn."

"Do so, then!" flashed Zelna, undauntedly. "I have naught to fear from the truth. It is only lies that I need dread!"

"Only lies, and the hot impetuosity of the man who loves you so passionately, Miss Mayne," with a fleeting smile that left his face graver, harder, colder than before. "Only for your coming, my lips could hardly have cleared away the mystery, and you would have been left to live down suspicion as a possible murderer. As it is, I swear that you never harmed Lapier Tostivan!"

Dan Dunn moved not, but Zelna sprung into his arms, sobbing and panting and kissing his pale face over and over. While the rest—

Well, time will not admit a full description of their respective antics, but Major Mayne, attracted by that wild cry from his daughter's lips as she beheld her lover in seemingly deadly combat with another, absolutely hugged Captain Drake and insisted on waltzing with him!

Cold, unmoved, motionless as though a corpse, Alva Parrish waited until that wild confusion in a measure subsided, then he went on:

"You would have learned this before, Mr. Dunn, only for your sudden outbreak. I told you I willed Miss Mayne to do so and thus; but just at the critical point, her natural horror of bloodshed, or her love for the father of her promised husband, proved too great for my influence."

"I knew there was too much at stake to run any extra chances, and hence I followed the lady closely. I even entered the building directly behind her, and the hump-backed janitor asked my business, even as he had questioned the lady before me. I answered him, and at the same time I brought him under the influence of my will. Then—"

"I was just in time! It may possibly have been that the swift subjection of Timberlake weakened my older influence—no matter; it is simple facts you wish most."

"I found the lady half swooning, with Lapier Tostivan supporting her, his face a curious mixture of wonder, horror and indignation. I saw the dagger lying on the floor. I sprung into the room and caught it up. He saw me—but the work had to be done!"

"I struck him. Only once. My sworn duty required no more."

Zelna bowed her head and covered her face, moaning faintly. Dan Dunn stood like a statue of stone, gazing upon this self-confessed assassin, yet unable to altogether condemn him. If his had been the hand to strike, another brain had directed that fatal blow!

"Where is Harlequin Hat?" he slowly asked.

Alva Parrish started, drawing a long breath, like one abruptly startled from a waking dream. But when he spoke again, it was to say:

"It was quite a change in the programme as laid down, but I dared not waste time in wholly regaining my influence over the lady. And so I finished the work I had begun. I placed the body as found, the next morning. I used his right forefinger to write those words upon the wall. They were not of my own invention. I was supplied them by Harriet Haylock, and was to give them to Zelna Mayne, in turn. Instead, I wrote them myself."

"Then, to pile proof upon proof, I broke the dagger with which the death-blow had been inflicted, leaving the blade where keen eyes must surely discover it. I stained the hands and cuffs of the lady with fresh blood, then exerted my will-power to force her down-stairs and into the street, ahead of me."

"Timothy Timberlake never addressed her again, though he so testified, as I willed that he should. He was lying in bed when we passed out of the building."

"Never mind what else happened that night. Enough that I swear by her own bright eyes, that I did no harm to Miss Mayne, save by keeping her under subjection through my powers, finally sending her home when the new day came."

"And now—if there remains even the ghost of a doubt as to the perfect truth of what I have confessed to you, Mr. Dunn, I ask you to put me to the test. Despite the fact that she now knows me, and hence is wholly upon her guard, if you so wish, I will compel Miss Mayne to perform any action which you may see fit to select as that test."

"No," shivered the poor girl, shrinking away with hidden eyes.

"Then—shall I give you a still more convincing proof of my powers of will, gentlemen?" added Parrish, for the first time with actual animation in voice as well as eyes. "If so, bear me company into the street, and follow my lead whither I will to go!"

"So that you can give us the slip?" half-sneered Dan Dunn.

With a contemptuous smile Alva Parrish held out his hands.

"Iron me, if you fear so much! Call a squad of policemen and let each one hold me covered with their guns. Or, since you fear my powers so intensely, bind me hand and foot and tie me down in an ambulance! All I ask is that you will convey me near enough a certain building for my eyes to rest upon it. Then—then you shall see whether I have been idly boasting of my will-power!"

Captain Drake nodded eagerly and Dan Dunn hesitated no longer. Even if a trick was hidden under this proposition, it could never be successfully worked in their very faces.

"How far is it from here, this building?" asked the Soft-Hand Detective, as he placed Zelna in charge of her father and prepared to enter upon the proposed test of this strange being's stranger power.

"You will know when we reach it," was the only response, and with this they were forced to rest content for the time being.

Was it magic? Whether or no, it is simple

truth that, though Alva Parrish uttered never a word of direction after leaving the house, the little party hurried on without fault, without hesitation, pausing at last before a dingy, weatherbeaten house whose every appearance indicated a long desertion. And all this with Alva Parrish in their midst, seemingly led rather than a leader. Then—

The front door opened and Craig Dairmid slowly moved toward them.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE LAST APPEARANCE OF HARLEQUIN HAT.

ALVA PARRISH was standing a little in advance of the group, but still within easy grasp of their ready hands, in case he should see fit to attempt an escape by flight.

He showed no indication of this, however, and seemed ignorant of all other presence save that of his once rival in love.

As Craig Dairmid reached the street, Parrish lifted his right hand to its full extent, uttering in a deep yet subdued tone, barely loud enough for those who stood nearest to catch:

"Down on your knees, dog! Lower!" as the escaped convict silently sunk to his knees on the pave, still with that strange, vacant look in the ghastly-pale face and staring eyes. "Grovel with your serpent's head in the mire! Bow down at the feet of your master, dog!"

Even Dan Dunn shivered a little as he saw how implicitly Craig Dairmid obeyed those whispered commands, not one of which could possibly have reached his ears from that distance.

"Rise, dog! Advance with your hands crossed above your evil heart! Halt! Now answer: Did you not attempt to blast the eyesight of David Tostivan?"

"I poured medicine into them, but it was not to blind him for all time," came the mechanical answer. "My love ordered me, but I could not go so far as—"

Alva Parrish gave an angry curse, and the spell was broken.

Craig Dairmid started back, brushing a hand across his bewildered eyes, but before he could turn to flee or even lift a hand to strike his enemies a blow, Turnbull was at his throat and they both fell heavily to the ground. Craig Dairmid lay helpless, his senses knocked out of him through his head coming into violent contact with the curb.

Dan Dunn took no part in his capture, his right hand closing tightly on the shoulder of the strange being who had so curiously drawn one of the prime schemers into the toils. And his face was very pale, very resolute as he muttered:

"Prove your powers still further, Alva Parrish! Show me where Harriet Haylock is hiding from my vengeance!"

The self-confessed assassin twisted his neck until he could look into those steely orbs, his own glittering strangely, his thin lips curling with a curious mixture of contempt and grief.

"Do you command, or are you begging a favor, Mr. Dunn?"

"Word it how you will, but if you fail me now, I swear to make you suffer all the torments of hell before I give you over to the hangman! Where is Harriet Haylock hiding herself? For the last time!"

Was that will broken?

It seemed so, for Alva Parrish bowed his head, his tense muscles relaxing until his arm felt soft and flabby under that fierce grip. And when he spoke, there was the same curious alteration to be noted in his voice.

"You have conquered, Dan Dunn. I will show you where Harlequin Hat lies in hiding. Come. It is full time to end this miserable tragedy!"

Craig Dairmid was left in charge of two policemen, securely ironed and with his feet bound. Then Dan Dunn, Robert Turnbull and Captain Drake followed closely after Alva Parrish as he entered the door which Craig Dairmid had left open as he emerged from hiding at the silent commands of the man who hated him so intensely.

"Is she hiding in this place?" demanded Dan Dunn.

"She is here," was the cold response.

At a sign from his master, Turnbull ran back to assist the policemen in carrying the escaped convict into the building, as the surest means of avoiding unwelcome curiosity on the part of outsiders.

Alva Parrish patiently waited until Dan Dunn signified that he might proceed, then silently led the way to the cellar. He paused for an instant before a door at the foot of the narrow steps, bowing his head and crossing his hands on his chest, as though in prayer.

Then he opened the door with a key taken from his pocket.

Dan Dunn was looking over his shoulder, and a sharp, almost agonized cry escaped his lips at that strange, unexpected sight.

The cellar was dimly lighted by two wax tapers, standing at the head of a rudely-improvised bier. And upon that bier lay the mortal remains of Harriet Haylock!

Alva Parrish silently moved forward and passed to the further side of the corpse, bowing

his head until his lips touched that marble brow, then rising erect and facing the awed trio, his face colorless as that of the woman whom he had so insanely loved, his eyes even more painfully brilliant than ordinary, his tones cold and even as he spoke:

"You commanded, and I have obeyed, David Tostivan. Here lies Harriet Haylock, beyond your punishment, not to be harmed by your vengeance, but rewarded by the hand of the man whom she lured to ruin and death!"

One hand rose to his lips, then he sunk upon his knees, his face bowing over that marble mask.

Not a sound. Not a shiver. Yet each one of those three awed men shrunk back with a strange presentiment of—what?

Dan Dunn was the first to recover, and with a low cry he leaped forward and grasped the avenger by the shoulders, lifting his head—to stand as if petrified.

The lower jaw was drooping. Tiny bits of shattered glass glittered in the light shed around by the wax tapers. The faint perfume of bitter almonds rose on the air!

The whole history of that strange ending of a mad love was never fully explained, though the main facts were not difficult to imagine, after Craig Dairmid, broken down in mind and spirit when he learned how Harriet Haylock came by her end, confessed the final price which Harlequin Hat set upon her hand in marriage.

With his crazy suspicions awakened, doubtless Alva Parrish had lurked in hiding about the place where Dan Dunn was being tortured, until he learned how the woman for whose love he was bartering his soul, was bargaining for his murder. Then he must have contrived to bring Dairmid under his powerful will, keeping him quiet until the time came for delivering him into the hands of his enemies.

As for what passed between Alva Parrish and Harriet Haylock, before he stabbed her to the heart, no mortal will ever know.

Craig Dairmid was the only one upon whom Dan Dunn could wreak his vengeance, as vowed in that stern vendetta, but he did what lay in his power. The elder charge of murder was held in abeyance, and the escaped convict tried, condemned to a term of years, then taken back to the Penitentiary at Jefferson City. If he lives to serve out his term, Dan Dunn will doubtless press that old charge to the bitter end.

Harriet Haylock and Alva Parrish were turned over to a certain medical college for dissection. Possibly they may still be of some good to the race which, in life, they did so much to harm and disgrace.

Dan Dunn—David Tostivan, on that occasion!—was married to Zelma Mayne, and Robert Turnbull served as "best man."

Why not? Where could the Soft-Hand Detective get a better, truer, more faithful friend? "The sealed verdict?"

The seal was broken, thanks to the confession made by Alva Parrish before he killed himself over the corpse of the woman whom, despite her manifold crimes, he loved ever in death.

The whole strange story was told in the papers, and the *Evening Star* fairly outdid itself in holding up to general admiration "our enterprising reporter" who was the first, as usual, to secure the actual facts of the celebrated case, even as he had been the earliest to lay information of the terrible crime before the public!

But this unavoidable publicity was too much for even Dan Dunn, not to say the pompous major and the blushing bride, and as soon as could be profitably done, the now happy family bade adieu to the Mound City forever, as a residence.

Of course Robert Turnbull bore them company.

"We couldn't get along without my right hand man!" said the Soft-Hand Detective.

And he means every word of that assertion, too!

THE END.

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